

Youth and Age in the Medieval North

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Youth and Age in the Medieval North

Edited by
Shannon Lewis-Simpson



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THE CHALLENGES OF QUANTIFYING YOUTH AND AGE IN THE MEDIEVAL NORTH

Shannon Lewis-Simpson

What, if anything, did it mean to be young and old in the medieval north? Age is ‘an organising principle that we all of us live with all of the time’,¹ but to define youth and age today, let alone in society of a thousand years ago, is difficult indeed. Although the study of the medieval life cycle has advanced in recent years, the focus has been on aspects of youth and age in high and late medieval societies, mostly within southern Europe.² With some notable exceptions, little dedicated work has been accomplished on the concepts of youth and age in the medieval north,³ here defined as encompassing the geographic northern

¹ A. Blaikie, ‘Whither the Third Age: Implications for Gerontology’, *Generations Review*, 2/1 (1992), 2–4 (p. 4).

² For medieval Europe in general, see J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986); Michael E. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250–1350* (Lanham, MD, 1989); Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990); *Ageing and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990); Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1996); Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: ‘Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain’*, trans. by Yael Lotan (London, 1997); Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (Yale, 2001); Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West From Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge, 2001); *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York, 2004); P.J.P. Goldberg, ‘Life and Death: the Ages of Man’, in *A Social History of England 1200–1500*, ed. by Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 413–34, 501–02. Concerning this southern high and late medieval hegemony, Edward James suggests with tongue half in cheek that Shulamith Shahar’s *Childhood in the Middle Ages* ‘should more honestly be retitled, as so many books of this kind should, *Childhood in the Last Third of the Middle Ages, between 1150 and 1500, Mostly in France*’: Edward James, ‘Childhood and Youth in the Early Middle Ages’, in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, pp. 11–23 (p. 14).

³ Aside from specific works listed in the notes of each contribution to this volume, see *Arkeologi om barn*, ed. by Barbro Johnsen and Stig Welinder (Uppsala, 1995); Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999); *Children and Material Culture*, ed. by Joanna Sofaer Devereaux (London, 2000); Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Snorri and his Death. Youth, Violence, and Autobiography in Medieval Iceland’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 75/3 (2003), 317–40; *Míðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius, (Reykjavík, 2005); Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 104 (2005), 297–325; Anna Hansen, ‘Representations of Children in the Icelandic Sagas’, in *Sagas & Societies. International Conference at Borgarnes, Iceland, September 5.–9.2002*, ed. by Stefanie

region of Europe and the North Atlantic within the temporal and cultural frames of Anglo-Saxon England and Viking-Age Britain, Iron-Age and medieval Scandinavia, and Iceland from the *landnám* to c. 1400. The medieval north is best distinguished from the remainder of medieval Europe by the gradual transition from a preliterate, Germanic culture to a literate, Christian culture, and the visible admixture of these two cultural traditions. The expansion of settlement and trade networks, and increased cultural contact with subsequent negotiation of ethnic identities, also typify the north. Much population movement occurred in the early medieval period and it should therefore be inferred that any given community was composed of individuals and groups of different ethnic origin or identity with varying social attitudes about the life cycle. The societies of the medieval north shared customs, poetry and arts which emerged from a pre-Christian Germanic worldview, later influenced by classical and Christian ideologies, but Fredrik Svanberg counters any idea of a pan-Scandinavian culture spanning the entirety of the Viking Age as simplistic and misleading. He states ‘There was no homogenous and coherent “culture”, conforming to a unilinear pattern of evolutionary change’.⁴ Although the culture of ninth-century England cannot be viewed in the same manner as that of Iceland in the high medieval period, certain commonalities exist to allow for a comparative volume of regionally and temporally specific studies. Definitions and expressions of youth and age in the north do substantially differ from those in the remainder of medieval Europe, and thus a volume dedicated solely to the north is timely and appropriate.

In the north, whether one is defined as young or old depends quite a lot on individual circumstance and not chronological age as is the

Würth, Tönno Jonuks and Axel Kristinsson, <<http://w210.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/dbt/volltexte/2004/1057/>> [accessed 21 August 2007]; Hansen, ‘Representations of Children in Early Icelandic Society’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sydney, 2006); Sally Crawford, ‘“*Gomol is snoterost*”: Growing Old in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Collectanea Antiqua: Essays in Memory of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes*, ed. by Martin Henig and Tyler Jo Smith, British Archaeological Reports International Series, 1673 (Oxford, 2007), pp. 53–59; Sally Crawford, ‘Companions, Co-incidences or Chattels? Children in the Early Anglo-Saxon Multiple Burial Ritual’, in *Children, Childhood and Society*, ed. by Sally Crawford and Gillian Shepherd (Oxford, 2007), pp. 83–92; Chris Callow, ‘Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society’, in *Children, Childhood and Society*, pp. 45–55.

⁴ Fredrik Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1* (Lund, 2003), p. 102. Although regional distinctions are more easily seen in material culture variation, Svanberg does not underscore the potential linguistic homogeneity of Scandinavia and other areas in the Old Norse speaking world, identifiable by traditional naming patterns and in skaldic versification, for example.

case in the south, thereby creating challenges for the observer of the northern life cycle. In the written sources, it is only the very young and the very old that are usually specified as such. Likewise, the very young and very old are most often recognisable in extant physical remains. The intermediate stages of the life cycle can be more difficult to identify and study in the cultural record. The stages of life generally referred to in classical and Christian writings were *infantia* ('infancy', 0–7 years), *pueritia* ('early childhood', 7–12 years), *adolescencia* ('adolescence', 12–14 to 20), *juventus* ('adulthood', 20–40 years), *senectus* ('old age, 40–60 years), and *senium* ('senility', 60 to death).⁵ This partitioned classical paradigm is of limited assistance to elucidate northern attitudes towards the life cycle since northern texts appear to define the 'ages of man' differently than elsewhere in Europe, generally having only two defined stages of child and adult, and an intermediate stage between 12 to 16 years of age, where one met certain criteria to enter into adulthood.⁶ In the Old Norse language a specific word for adolescence does not exist, as noted by Carolyne Larrington, thus begging the question whether we can define this intermediate stage if the originating culture did not do so. The Norwegian King Hakon IV Hakonsson's Frostathing laws of 1217–63 determine that a child reaches *fulltíða* ('the age of majority') at fifteen winters,⁷ while Berit Sellevold cautions it remains difficult to correctly sex the skeletal remains of any 'sub-adult', even one estimated at twenty years, suggesting a broad age range for sexual immaturity. Nic Percivall and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson advise that although twelve and sixteen are significant 'milestone' birthdays for the male medieval Iclander,⁸ the transition from childhood to adulthood can take place before and after these ages depending on what other developmental factors are taken into account which are not obviously expressed in the source material.

⁵ J.A. Burrow gives a thorough overview of the stages of life in *The Ages of Man*, pp. 55–94. See Jordi Sánchez-Martí, this volume, for an overview of Ælfric's rewriting of the ages of man in Gregory the Great's *Homiliarum in Evangelia Libri Duo*, and Nic Percivall for a discussion of the classical tradition in relation to defining adolescence in medieval Iceland.

⁶ As well as Sánchez-Martí and Percivall, see also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, this volume, on the life cycle.

⁷ *The Earliest Norwegian Laws, Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law*, trans. by Lawrence M. Larson (New York), IV, c. 34, p. 272; IX, c. 22–23, pp. 338–39.

⁸ See also Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society'.

To approach the life cycle in the north as comprehensively as possible, the contributors to this volume call upon a variety of cultural sources. The study of different evidence types contributes to an overall understanding of ageing and the six factors which modern gerontologists consider critical to individual maturation: social, chronological, cognitive, emotional, functional, and biological/sexual age.⁹ These six factors are explored, either implicitly or explicitly, by the contributors to this volume to investigate stages of the life cycle in the context of changing religious, political and social structures in the north. For example, chronological age can be assigned to skeletal remains, and the paleopathology of the body suggests biological age. Functional/social age may be gleaned from the presence or absence of grave goods in the pre-Christian north, if one accepts that grave goods reflect the symbolic or actual role of the individual. Social age is also implicit in the delineation of ages of responsibility and inheritance within medieval law codes. The expressions of emotional and cognitive ages of literary characters and historical personages colour Old Norse and Old English narratives. These six factors which contribute to an individual's maturation can be seen variously in both material and literary narratives, and these interdisciplinary forms of evidence can be read together as cultural texts to fully understand the life cycle of the individual within northern society.

There are some methodological problems common to the study of both material and linguistic evidence from the medieval north. One of the problems with an interdisciplinary approach is that the different forms of evidence do not always overlap chronologically, particularly noticeable when one attempts to reconcile contemporary material evidence, predominantly dated by stylistic classification and regional comparison, with the literary and linguistic evidence contained in manuscripts, transcribed in some cases many centuries after the supposed oral composition of the narrative, poem, law, or name. One can argue that linguistic evidence, although attested later, reflects earlier attitudes towards youth and age which are also reflected in mortuary practices. Neither form of evidence in itself gives the 'truth' about what a particular society believed about the life cycle, but can

⁹ See Anne Jamieson, 'Theory and Practice in Social Gerontology', in *Researching Ageing and Later Life*, ed. by Anne Jamieson and Christina R. Victor (Buckingham, 2002), pp. 7–20. This is discussed in Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 12.

elucidate northern mentalities, defined as ‘collective understandings, values and attitudes’,¹⁰ towards youth and age. This leads to another methodological problem: the mentalities which are most visible in the cultural record are, for the most part, those of the elite. Skaldic verse, saga texts, and histories were created for and by the elite, the names recorded in deeds, charters and other sources would also be those of the elite. Law codes were social documents, but elite creations and prescriptions. The poor are even marginalised in the grave: the absence of grave goods minimises what one can deduce about the individual’s social role in connection with age. Dependents may be partially visible in laws and such texts as miracle books, but attitudes expressed towards the indigent young and old are indubitably those of their elite benefactors. These difficulties should be borne in mind, but they should not forbid an attempt to synthesise diverse forms of linguistic and material evidence, and the inherent mentalities communicated in their production and use.

Material Evidence of the Life Cycle

Although Edward James suggests graves are the ‘most obvious type of archaeological evidence’¹¹ to understand the life cycle, there are problems with this form of evidence. Variations in mortuary practice occur as a result of social changes such as the conversion to Christianity, with inhumation becoming most prevalent. But, the rite of cremation was widely practiced throughout the pre-Christian north, and thus the extant osseous remains from interments may not be statistically representative of an entire buried population. The statistics of chronological ages as gleaned from skeletal remains should determine who is young and, more importantly, who is old. But, age determination of skeletal remains is problematic for those older than c. 21 years, and it is difficult to determine what age is considered chronologically old in any given society. Ages at death of the very young can be reasonably determined through dental eruption and bone development, but one should note that the physical remains of children are, like living children, the most vulnerable, in that these juvenile remains sometimes do not survive the processes of recovery and excavation. Infant and child burials are

¹⁰ P. Birke, *History and Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 91–96.

¹¹ James, ‘Childhood and Youth in the Early Middle Ages’.

statistically underrepresented in the pre-Christian burial record: the numbers of extant graves surely do not reflect actual numbers of dead children within society as realistically one can assume a higher rate of infant mortality existed in the medieval period than in the modern era. This lack of burial evidence makes it just as difficult to study the child in death as the marginalisation of the young in textual narratives compounds the difficulty of studying the historical child.¹² The statistically high numbers of infants and children buried at the monastic cemetery of Selja, Norway and the Late Viking-Age cemetery of Fjälkinge, Scania, Sweden, are all the more important in this context, as examined in the contributions by Berit Sellevold and Lotta Mejsholm.

Not only are skeletal remains important to determine chronological and biological/sexual age, and thus who may be considered a child and who is old at death, but the manner of burial can express social and functional age, and general attitudes towards the young and the old. There is much variability in medieval northern mortuary practice, so any attitudes expressed in burial should be considered specific to the time and place of the interment. At a most basic level, grave goods are thought to reflect the individual's social role, be it functional or symbolic, and therefore the presence or absence of grave goods may inform as to when a child enters society and when an older person leaves it. The adoption of Christianity caused another level of change in burial customs. One sees, for example, a different level of care bestowed upon the most vulnerable of society, including children, than what is found in pre-Christian ritual, as discussed by Christina Lee, Lotta Mejsholm, and Berit Sellevold.

Textual Evidence of the Life Cycle

Literary sources provide the most compelling accounts of the personal experiences of the young and old within society, speaking as they often do of the functional, social, emotional and cognitive ageing of the individual. It is perhaps indicative of the persuasion of these accounts that this volume is decidedly text-oriented, and that there are more papers which concern the young and old male rather than the female.

¹² This statistical invisibility of the dead child is discussed by Christina Lee. See also Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 75–79.

Yet, however convincing these sources are, certain problems must be addressed. First, it is important to remember that, for the most part, the medieval north was preliterate. As such, it is important to consider information from personal names, skaldic verse, and, although not addressed in this volume, runic inscriptions, to gain a sense of social perceptions of youth and age. For example, the act of naming children after grandparents may express kinship ties and systems of inheritance across generations, as addressed by Philadelphia Ricketts. Naming patterns may indicate customary functional and social roles for the old within the family. Slandorous nicknames, *auknefni*, as discussed in my contribution, may permit one to ascertain what was deemed worthy of insult: if you called someone ‘a wrinkled old bag’ (*Belgr*), this was probably as much of an insult in Viking-Age York as it would be today.

Medieval northern law codes are of interest for what they state concerning legal ages of responsibility and for edicts concerning the treatment of the young and old. Intuitively, one would have expected that the Christianisation of the north should have resulted in the construction of social welfare systems arising from Christian values and laws. Yet perhaps Christian values were not universally practiced as there remained a need to codify laws concerning the treatment of the young and old. ‘We should see the advent of Christianity as the beginning of a prolonged dialogue between two vastly different perspectives: the official world view of the church as against the traditional world view of the people.’¹³ As noted by Vésteinn Ólason, this dialogue occurred everywhere in the medieval north and the syncretic interplay between ‘traditional’ and Christian ideologies can be seen in every type of cultural product from sixth-century Barrington to thirteenth-century Borg.

Skaldic verses, embedded within younger saga narratives, generally praise the youth, and do not speak much of the old. This lacuna may result from the poetic conventions under which the skalds composed rather than any real disdain for the old. Concerning Old English verse, Elizabeth Tyler notes that ‘Historians have tended to use secular verse as a historical source in ways which take little or no account of the requirements and conventions of style and form, or of the possibility of

¹³ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, trans. by Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík, 1998), p. 42.

artistry'.¹⁴ In the same volume, Judith Jesch cautions one should always be mindful of poetic reception and transmission. She argues that the skalds attempted to “‘write” history in a preliterate age”, but that their poems assumed a more ‘historiographical function’ in later narratives, necessarily changing the way in which the mentalities expressed within are received by the modern reader.¹⁵ This is especially important when discussing the vibrant presentations of youth and old age in the family sagas, *Íslendingasögur*, that rely upon skaldic verse to either support or to form intrinsic parts of the saga narratives.¹⁶

This notion of historicity challenges analyses of literary texts from the north, especially saga scholarship. The *samtíðarsögur*, contemporary sagas, have been viewed as more historically accurate than other saga texts, especially with regards to dates and other specifics, as they were written shortly after the thirteenth-century events described within. The details contained in these sagas invite an historical approach, and the value of these sagas as purely literary sources tends to be overlooked, as addressed by Nic Percivall. *Íslendingasögur*, the family sagas, on the other hand, are thought to have originated from older, orally derived forms, joint products of the ideologies and mentalities of the Viking Age and the reality of the medieval society in which they were committed to vellum.¹⁷ As such, scholars have been reticent to use these as historical documents due to a lack of confidence in the specifics presented within the texts, and concern over the time which has elapsed between the recording of the event and the event itself. Anna Hansen employs a comparative approach and uses the law code *Grágás* to guide her discussions of the fosterage evidence from *Íslendingasögur*. Jón Víðar Sigurðsson would argue that if one assumes a high level of social continuity in medieval Icelandic society, then both *Íslendingasögur*

¹⁴ Elizabeth Tyler, ‘Poetics and the Past: Making History with Old English Poetry’, in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Tyler and Ross Balzaretti (Turnhout, 2006), pp. 225–50 (p. 265).

¹⁵ Judith Jesch, ‘The “Meaning of the Narrative Moment”: Poets and History in the Late Viking Age’, in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, pp. 251–65 (p. 226).

¹⁶ Judith Jesch, ‘History in the “Political Sagas”’, *Medium Aevum*, 62, 2 (1993), 210–20.

¹⁷ See, for example, Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. by Nicholas Jones (Harvard, 2004); and Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, pp. 38–62, for overviews of saga transmission and composition.

and *samtíðarsögur* can be used jointly to understand the basic principles of social organisation, and thus how the young and old were regarded in medieval Iceland. What is important to remember is that, due to the nature of their transmission, the sagas (and I would further argue any medieval narratives) should not be considered static archives of memories and attitudes from a specific period, but living documents reflective of changing social and cultural influences, and anxieties about such change, as noted by Carolyne Larrington.

Common Themes to the Study of Youth and Age

The papers are organised around the stages of the life cycle, from birth to decrepitude. In many respects the very young and the very old can be viewed similarly with regards to how medieval northern society defines their roles. Children can serve a utilitarian function as resources to be exploited for work, or as a means of forging alliances between families and cultural groups, but they can also be nurtured in their formative years. Indeed, attitudes of sentiment and function surrounding the child are not mutually exclusive as they are both concerned with the potential of the child. Pauline Stafford has suggested that childhood can be described negatively, in the sense that ‘it is the period before adulthood, where the latter is defined as physical maturity and/or the age of full social participation and responsibility’.¹⁸ One could suggest, of course, that such a definition could apply in reverse to old age in that one is no longer a full social participant nor is one fully physically robust. As discussed by Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, the Icelandic poet Hólmgöngu-Bersi Véleifsson compares the conditions of the young and the old in the following skaldic verse:

Liggjum báðir
í lamasessi
Halldórr ok ek,
høfum engi þrek.
Veldr æska þér,
en elli mér;

¹⁸ Pauline Stafford, ‘Review Article: Parents and Children in the Early Middle Ages’, *Early Medieval Europe*, 10/2 (2001), 257–71 (p. 261).

þess batnar þér,
en þeygi mér.¹⁹

We lie both together on a bench, Halldórr and I, capable of nothing;
youth causes [this to] you, but old age [causes this to] me; you will recover
from this, but I will not.

In this verse, the young and old are considered similarly in the sense of their apparent uselessness and dependence on others, and their lack of agency within society. Hólmǫngu-Bersi takes note of the transitional nature of ‘being young’ and ‘being old’ as liminal periods before and after the prime of one’s life when one is capable of ‘something’. The very young and very old are perceived as marginal figures as they prepare to enter or leave society while taking up new functions and social roles. This sense of marginality is a common theme throughout this volume.

Youth

Another common theme to the study of young and old, and addressed by Christina Lee, is that of the vulnerability of the young, and the fact that the very young, the very old and the infirm are those who require special care and protection within society. Lee develops a link between burials of children and those of infirm individuals within Middle Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of and suggests that a social duty of care was extended in the afterlife towards those requiring protection in life. This link between the young and the infirm and disabled is also noted by Lotta Mejsholm.

Although the life cycle begins with the birth of a child, ‘in many societies, a child is scarcely human until *social* birth has occurred’, when the child enters society.²⁰ In Christian societies, social birth generally coincides with baptism, but in pre-Christian or syncretic societies, exhibiting a mixture of pre-Christian and Christian beliefs, it should be noted that other rituals are just as important for the child to be considered a full member of society. Through the presence of grave

¹⁹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), p. 261, stanza (48). Translation by Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, see this volume.

²⁰ Stafford, ‘Review Article’, p. 263 (my italics).

goods and orientation of graves at the Late Viking-Age cemetery at Fjälkinge, Scania, Sweden, Lotta Meijsholm argues that one can witness a dialogue between traditional and Christian definitions of childhood and different means of child social integration. She argues that it is not so much the inclusion of grave goods but rather specific types of grave goods that denote attitudes towards the child, the child's status, and whether the child has been integrated as a full member of society.

Grave goods are only one part of the evidence of burial, and Berit Sellevold discusses rites specific to child burial in twelfth-century Norway. Sellevold agrees with Philippe Ariès's influential claim that there was no childhood in the Middle Ages,²¹ at least not in the modern sense of the word, and that if 'childhood *per se* may have been of small importance in medieval Norwegian society, this does not mean that the child itself was unimportant'. The evidence of burials in the monastic church at Selja, western Norway, suggests that parents were very concerned about the welfare of their dead children in the afterlife. Some children were granted prestigious burials at Selja: being a child was no barrier to expressions of status in death, and may indicate the affection in which the child was held.

Anna Hansen investigates the nurturing and development of children, or lack thereof, by fosterparents and guardians in medieval Iceland, stressing the cognitive, functional and social development of the child. She clearly defines the concepts and ramifications of legal fosterage and guardianship as expressed in *Gísla saga*, compared with the evidence of Icelandic law codes and *Íslendingasögur*, and argues that children could hold different status depending on their being fostered or being placed with a guardian as a dependant. Hansen discusses the conflicts which can occur in the sagas as a result of these different relationships and what these practices can tell us with regards to parenting strategies in medieval Iceland.

The next two contributions consider how childhood is portrayed in *byskupa sögur*, the bishops' sagas, but from very different perspectives. Bernadine McCreesh examines how the childhoods of the Icelandic bishop-saints are portrayed in the saga texts. She questions whether

²¹ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London, 1962), pp. 33 and 128 [first published as *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien régime* (Paris, 1960)].

these accounts of childhood evolved out of a native Icelandic tradition or consist of motifs from contemporary and earlier European hagiographical accounts. Instead of examining the bishops' childhoods, Joanna Skórzewska observes the notion of childhood in *byskupa sögur* as can be seen from the miracles associated with the bishops. She suggests that the authors of the sagas were very interested in the concept of childhood and its transitory nature. Children were portrayed as being vulnerable and in need of the intercession of the saints. The intercession demonstrates that it was right and proper for parents to bestow love and care upon children in medieval Iceland.

However children are portrayed in material or literary texts, they are looked upon as investments, be they political, emotional, or financial.²² The next few contributions tackle the fraught time of adolescence when the investment pays dividends or not. Nic Percivall considers the ambiguous legal and social definitions of male childhood and adulthood in medieval Icelandic society as existing in *Grágás* and the *samtíðarsögur*, the contemporary sagas. She outlines certain legal criteria for the transition to adulthood and applies these to the saga evidence as literary texts. Carolyne Larrington also takes a literary approach, and focuses on the conflict arising between fathers and adolescent sons during a time of emotional and cognitive development, stressing that modern psychological theory can inform saga accounts.

Age

Carolyne Larrington quotes Laurence Steinberg's list of adolescent anxieties which are noticeable in saga accounts: identity, autonomy and achievement. One can argue that identity, autonomy and achievement are of the utmost importance for elderly individuals as well. Philadelphia Ricketts bridges the generation gap and discusses how grandmothers assert their identity and autonomy in the financial and emotional care of their grandchildren during the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic Commonwealth. Ricketts' study emphasises the importance

²² See also Victoria Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 9–12, who discusses the emotional investment of parents surrounding the dead child, and also the investment of care and resources given to those who are disabled at birth, with a cleft palate for example, and brought to adulthood.

of an active functional and social role for the old within the medieval north, and how a useful role can be taken up by grandmothers to the, mostly financial, benefit of their grandchildren. Ricketts cautions, as does Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, that three-generational families are rare within medieval Iceland, and generally those who play an active role in the rearing of children are those who are in prime of life.

Notwithstanding the importance of some grandmothers in the saga texts as discussed by Ricketts, there is a distinct bias towards discussions of male maturation in medieval northern texts: certainly the eponymous accounts within *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga*, not to mention the many *byskupa sögur* and numerous Old English heroic and Christian texts, invite study of the male life cycle. Jordi Sánchez-Martí considers the life cycle of the Anglo-Saxon male as portrayed within the Old English literary corpus. He stresses the fact that cognitive development and the gain of *andgít* or wisdom is most important to the young Anglo-Saxon male. Wisdom acquired by the old man is, however, superseded by the loss of physical strength to negatively define the old. Contra Burrow, Sánchez-Martí argues that old age (*senectus*) is not the golden age of the Anglo-Saxon life cycle. Rather, he argues, prime of life is the apex of the Anglo-Saxon life cycle, when cognitive training has been completed, and biological decrepitude has not yet taken hold.

As considered by Sánchez-Martí, the physically declined old man can hope to regain some use or status within Anglo-Saxon society by providing training and cognitive development for the young. In the medieval north, an active, useful later life can supersede chronology in determining who is 'old', as discussed by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and myself. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson argues that medieval Icelandic saga texts consistently display profoundly negative attitudes about the old. He argues for a social continuity from the *landnám* to the Commonwealth Period, and definitions of and attitudes towards the old can be considered similarly throughout the medieval period. The old were a burden in Icelandic society, and not a treasured resource of knowledge or experience. Likewise, in Viking-Age Britain, the old male body was ridiculed, perhaps because the young male feared becoming old, poor, and dependent on others. The old male in Viking-Age Britain had more of a social responsibility to remain physically active, rather than just mentally active, and this would seem to correspond with some later Icelandic accounts of old men. The same sort of negativity is not prevalent towards old women.

In contrast to this prevalent negative attitude towards the old male body, Ármann Jakobsson examines the aged patriarch in the Icelandic family sagas and argues that old men could hold power for a long time and be thought of in a positive light as long as they were still useful. All contributors agree that function is key for the old. The maintenance of function can turn back the clock somewhat and excuse an aged individual from being old, even if they are so defined biologically and chronologically.

Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova's contribution concludes the volume with a discussion of the poetry that the Icelandic skald Egill Skallagrímsson composed in his youth and his old age. In considering whether the skaldic verses can be considered valid expressions by Egill in youth and old age, she makes an excellent point that the verses are in agreement with what one would expect of a young child and an adult with regards to emotional, cognitive and social development. A young child imitates linguistically, an older child experiments, an experienced skald is true and original in his craft. A young child is concerned with exploits and gaining prestige in a new social role, an old skald laments the onslaught of an old and useless body and mind. In Egill's poetry we gain an intimate view of the ageing of one individual which may not be accurate for the entirety of the north but is no less poignant for that.

This is the first interdisciplinary volume upon this theme. It is hoped that this volume will focus attention upon the importance of age as a principle of social organisation in the medieval north, and open discourse on youth and age amongst medieval archaeologists, historians, and philologists, while introducing particularities of medieval research to sociologists and gerontologists working within other periods and areas. The contributors, based in Scandinavia, Iceland, Britain, Spain, Australia, and Canada, and representing both established and up-and-coming scholars in the field, showcase the diverse issues that surround interdisciplinary studies of youth and age. The contributors have worked to progress the definitions of young and old in the north, taking into account changing mentalities as a result of political and social changes, and increased Latinate and Christian influence. The contributors also differentiate between socio-cultural versus biological definitions of young

and old and, in so doing, highlight some of the challenges associated with interdisciplinary studies of age. Lastly, it is hoped that the regionally and temporally specific nature of the contributions will lead to further comparative study across the medieval north, and emphasise homeland versus colonial attitudes towards young and old.²³

²³ I am grateful to the anonymous readers for their useful comments, to Jordi Sánchez-Martí and Ármann Jakobsson for reading this introduction, and to Marcella Mulder for her assistance in all matters.

FOREVER YOUNG: CHILD BURIAL IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND*

Christina Lee

Be unstrangan

Forþam a man sceal unstrangam menn for godes lufe and ege līpelicor
deman and scrifon þonne þam strangan.

Forþamðe ne mæg se unmaga þam magan, we witon fullgeorne gelice
byrðene ahebban, ne se unhala þam halan gelice.¹

And þy we sceolon medmian and gesceadlice todælan ylde and geogope,
welan and wædle, freot and þeowet, hæle and unhæle.²

The past too often resembles a foreign country, colourful and yet unfamiliar. This applies especially to the study of non-literary evidence, where the analysis is largely dependent on interpretation. In this essay I want to examine a practice of burying children with adults who suffered from some form of impairment in Anglo-Saxon England. It should be noted that any analysis of ‘children’ is fraught with difficulty, since there have been claims that concepts such as childhood are modern inventions.³ Similarly, ideas of what constitutes a disability in Anglo-Saxon

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¹ ‘Of the weak: Therefore one must for the love and fear of God judge them more gently and impose a lesser penalty than that of the strong. Because we know full well that the same charges cannot be raised from the helpless as from the powerful, [and] the sick is not equal to the healthy one’: Laws of Cnut in *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by F. Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle, 1903–16), I, p. 354 (hereafter Liebermann); translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

² ‘And therefore we must consider and differentiate between the old and the young, the wealthy and poor, the free and serfs, the healthy and the sick’: 2 Cnut 68. 1, Liebermann, I, p. 354.

³ P. Ariès, *L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime* (Paris, 1960). In order to discuss childhood, children need to be made visible. The remains of their material culture may go unnoticed, see Andrew Chamberlain’s summary of the research question,

society may differ greatly from those of modern populations. Irina Metzler has recently raised some fundamental questions regarding medieval disability.⁴ In her view it is vital to differentiate between impairment, which denotes the physical aspect, and disability, which encompasses the attitudes of a society towards impairment. Thus, a missing finger may be felt by the person who has lost it, but this may not matter to the status and wealth of the individual. Medieval societies were familiar with degenerative diseases, and old age may have been as much of impairment as a missing limb. It is feasible that the acceptance of impairment in such societies is much greater than today.

It may therefore be sensible to ask whether children or individuals with impairment were regarded to be different at all. A fleeting view of Anglo-Saxon evidence reveals that there are differences, since in the period of furnished burial most children have different grave goods to those of adults, and laws and images also seem to distinguish between children and mature people. Similarly, there seems to be differences in the spacing of the sick, and not all cemeteries contain inhumations of people with visible pathology.⁵ Where they do occur there is often a curious convention of burying people with impairment alongside children, which raises the question whether children and people with impairment may have been regarded as belonging to the same group in society. In order to examine such burials, however, it is necessary to take a look at what little is known of concepts of children and the impaired. It should be considered that concepts of 'childhood' or impairment may have changed during the almost seven hundred years of Anglo-Saxon history. Changes over this period, such as the conversion to Christianity or the advent of literacy, may have led to changes in the treatment of the weak, and it is possible that literary texts may not be a mirror of contemporary attitudes, but rather repeat 'foreign' influences, such as patristic writings.

'Commentary: Missing Stages of Life—Towards the Perception of Children in Archaeology', in *Invisible People and Processes: Writing Gender and Childhood into European Archaeology*, ed. by J. Moore and E. Scott (London, 1997), pp. 248–50.

⁴ *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400* (London, 2006); a re-examination of the osteological data for individuals with impairment in burials from Late Anglo-Saxon England will be published by Dawn Hadley in her forthcoming article, 'Social and Physical Difference In and Beyond the Anglo-Saxon Churchyard'.

⁵ This, of course, does not mean that these populations did not suffer disease, since the majority of illnesses do not leave traces on the bone. We do not, for example, know how individuals with a mental disability would have been treated or how they were buried.

How Many Children?

The burial of the dead may not be a reflection of living populations, but it may tell us about aspirations of the living and the relationship that the living felt with the deceased members of their society. In the case of children, and especially infants, there are immediate problems, since, generally speaking, there are too few young children at most Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. At some sites, such as Finglesham (Kent) there are no burials under the age of 18 months, but a sizeable group of 18 months to five-year-olds,⁶ but at other cemeteries, such as Great Chesterford (Essex), this figure is well over 40% in the age group of under five year olds.⁷ Such puzzling observations complicate the study of children in Anglo-Saxon burials spaces and problems of comparative research are further exacerbated by the fact that terms such as 'infant', 'neonate', 'child' and 'juvenile' are applied to various age groups in different excavation reports.⁸ At some sites no burials of children under the age of two years were detected.⁹ The paucity of infant burial has been explained in different ways, and there is a lively debate about the 'missing children'. Some have suggested that children under the age of one were not buried at all, others like Sally Crawford have argued the absence of neonate bones may be due to shallow graves, which are eroded by subsequent activity of the top soil, and the fact that fragile infant bones may decay much quicker than those of adults.¹⁰ Questions of infant mortality are intimately linked with the life cycle of populations: at what age did Anglo-Saxon women become pregnant, and how many children did they bear?¹¹ Paleopathologists generally assume

⁶ Sally Crawford, 'Children, Death and the Afterlife in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 6 (1993), 83–91 (p. 85).

⁷ A very useful compilation is table 18, collated by T. Anderson and J. Andrews, 'The Human Skeletons', in *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery on Mill Hill, Deal, Kent*, ed. by Rick Parfitt and Birte Bruggmann, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph, 14 (London, 1997), p. 219.

⁸ Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 24–27; see also 'Children, Death and the Afterlife', p. 85. Anderson and Andrews have only included children under the age of two years in their calculation: Anderson and Andrews, 'Human Skeletons', p. 219.

⁹ As for example, at Mill Hill: Anderson and Andrews, 'Human Skeletons', p. 217.

¹⁰ Crawford, *Childhood*, p. 17.

¹¹ 'Communities of the Dead: Evidence for Living Populations from Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries'; in *Authority & Community in the Middle Ages*, ed. by D. Mowbray, R. Purdie and I.P. Wei (Stroud, 1999), pp. 1–17; *The Spindle and the Spear: a Critical*

an infant mortality which is similar to that of populations in modern sub-Saharan Africa.¹² While it is debatable whether or not medieval populations can be compared to those in modern developing countries, in the absence of reliable birth control past pregnancy rates should be assumed to be higher than today.

This poses some interesting questions: where are those missing children? Have they been buried elsewhere? If this is the case, then perhaps pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon cemeteries do already exhibit a form of separation where not every member of the community is included. Reasons for the presence or absence of children in burial spaces in other societies have been explained as having to do with perceptions of children as ‘persons’—such as the Greek philosopher Socrates who advises that children have no personality before the seventh day after birth, for which reason they were allowed to be exposed up to that period.¹³ The scarcity of children at Roman cemeteries in Britain may have to do with Roman ideas of child burial. Pliny, for example, advises the burial of children less than six months of age under the eaves of the house.¹⁴ Dorothy Watts claims that the increase of child burial in fourth-century Britain is a result of Christianisation and Christian attitudes towards burial.¹⁵ Certainly some Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, such as Sutton Hoo (Suffolk) with its first wave of high-status and predominantly male inhumations, suggest that burial space was carefully negotiated, and, even without consideration of associated objects, contains information on the identities of the interred.¹⁶

Enquiry into the Construction of Meaning and Gender in Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, 288 (Oxford, 1999). See also Dawn Hadley, ‘Negotiating Gender, Family and Status in Anglo-Saxon Burial Practices in England c. 600–950’, in *Gender in the Early Medieval World*, ed. by L. Brubaker and J. Smith (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 301–23.

¹² C. Duhig, ‘The Human Skeletal Remains’, in *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Edix Hill (Barrington A), Cambridgeshire*, ed. by T. Malim and J. Hines (York, 1998), pp. 160–61; A. Boddington, ‘From Bones to Population the Problem of Numbers’, in *Death, Decay and Reconstruction: Approaches to Archaeology and Forensic Science*, ed. by A.N. Garland and R.C. Janaway (Manchester, 1987), pp. 180–97.

¹³ D. Amundson, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Baltimore, 1996), pp. 57–62.

¹⁴ D. Watts, ‘Infant Burials and Romano-British Christianity’, *Archaeology Journal*, 146 (1989), 327–83 (p. 372).

¹⁵ ‘Infant Burials’, p. 379.

¹⁶ It should also be noted that Sutton Hoo was subsequently used as an execution burial ground in the tenth century: *Sutton Hoo: a Seventh-Century Princely Burial and its Context*, ed. by M. Carver, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, 69 (London, 2005).

Examinations of burial archaeology have placed great emphasis on the fact that 'the dead do not bury themselves', and that burial options and goods relate to the status of the deceased.¹⁷ It has however been noted that grave goods are not only gender-specific, but that they also seem to correspond to the position in the life cycle. For example, women of child-bearing age are given more grave goods. Nick Stoodley's analysis of 1230 undisturbed graves from a range of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries seems to suggest that girdle items were given to women who died in prime of life, and 59% per cent of them were buried with children.¹⁸ Whether these women were carers or mothers of children is unclear, but generally women buried with girdle items had the richest burial assemblages¹⁹ and perhaps childbearing or childrearing added to female status. If this is the case, the burial of a child with an adult woman may be taken as underlining her status as a carer.

The Place of Children

Anybody studying the burial archaeology of children will find that this is even more enigmatic than that of adults. If burial sites were selective, then the function of the grave and cemetery should be questioned. Did graves have a mnemonic function? Were the spaces for the display of wealth and status, and could children be excluded from such rituals, since they may not have had any disposable wealth as yet? Children are usually given fewer grave goods (with exceptions), and the burials of very small children are generally unfurnished. This has been interpreted by scholars as an indicator of 'emotional detachment' which parents of infants exercised.²⁰ Consequently children are only 'invested' with goods and burial space when there is a higher likelihood of survival.²¹ If wealth and status indicated in grave goods were linked to physical ability, then there are other groups comparative to children who were dependent on care: the old, the sick, and people with severe

¹⁷ E.J. Pader, *Symbolism, Social Relations and the Interpretation of Mortuary Remains*, BAR International Series, 130 (Oxford, 1982).

¹⁸ Nick Stoodley, 'From Cradle to the Grave: the Organization of the Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite', *World Archaeology*, 31 (2000), 456–72 (p. 466).

¹⁹ Stoodley, 'Cradle', p. 466.

²⁰ Stoodley, 'Cradle', p. 459: 'High child mortality may have prevented parents becoming emotionally attached to their offspring until an age when it was considered that their chance of survival had risen.'

²¹ Stoodley, 'Cradle', p. 459.

impairment would also have needed assistance from their peers. While the aging of populations from skeletal material remains problematic,²² some diseases and conditions leave clear signals on the bone, so that burials of individuals with impairments may be examined for patterns of inclusion and status.

It has not been long that the very existence of concepts of childhood in medieval societies was even discussed by academics. Sally Crawford has shown that texts and art sources from Anglo-Saxon England clearly show the care that parents invested in their children, which is summarized in poems, such as *The Fortunes of Man*, incorporated in the tenth-century *Exeter Book*:

Ful oft þæt gegongeð, mid godes meahtum,
 þætte wer ond wif in woruld cennað
 bearn mid gebyrdum ond mid bleom gyrwað,
 tennap ond tætaþ, oppæt seo tid cymeð,
 gegæð gearrimum, þæt þa geongan leomu,
 lifæstan leoðu, geloden weorþað.
 Fergað swa ond feþað fæder ond modor,
 giefað ond gierwaþ. God ana wat
 hwæt him weaxendum winter bringað!²³

The Fortunes of Men considers the anxieties about the various fates that a child may suffer, which include death at a young age, starvation or blindness, and becoming lame or infirm. It is obvious that the death of a child was as painful for the Anglo-Saxons as it is for modern parents. Prayers and charms, as surviving in medical texts such as the *Lacnunga*, suggest that some expectant mothers may have gone a long way to secure the safe delivery of a child.²⁴ In the light of these anxi-

²² A. Chamberlain, 'Problems and Prospects in Paleodemography', in *Human Osteology in Archaeology and Forensic Science*, ed. by M. Cox and S. Mays (London, 2000), pp. 101–15 (pp. 105–07). For Anglo-Saxon evidence, see J. Hines, 'Lies, Damned Lies, and a *curriculum vitae*, Reflections on Statistics and the Populations of Early Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Cemeteries', in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, ed. by Sam Lucy and Andrew Reynolds, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph, 17 (London, 2002), pp. 88–102.

²³ 'It very often happens that through the power of God a man and a woman bring a child into this world through birth, and clothe it in bright garments, and bring it up and caress it, until the time comes, with the passing of the years that the young limbs, full of life, become fully grown. Father and mother thus lead and guide it, provide and clothe it. God alone knows what the years will bring the growing child': *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III: The Exeter Book*, ed. by K. v. Dobie (New York, 1936), p. 156.

²⁴ The *Lacnunga* (London, British Library, Harley 585) contains several recipes against infertility, as well as miscarriage and the inability to produce enough milk to

eties, what happened when their wish was not granted, and they had to bury their child? Should we not expect a special place for a dead child? Sally Crawford has claimed that child graves in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are always special.²⁵

Age Markers?

Some objects are more likely to occur with child inhumations and may carry an inherent age symbolism. For example, the most common grave good, a knife, occurs generally in graves of those aged three and older, and the number of beads steadily increases with age.²⁶ In the absence of recognisable toys, or other child-related objects, the transition from childhood to adulthood, according to most archaeologists, is defined by being buried in adult dress.²⁷ This transition, as has been shown, varies from site to site, but may coincide with the time of menarche for girls,²⁸ and an age of twelve years for boys.²⁹ It is, however, debatable whether such a transition can be equated with full adult status. Children may at this point have been expected to manage an adult workload, but it is debatable whether they had the means to form the nucleus of a household. Even after attaining this threshold, certain prestige objects, such as swords for men or bronze vessels for women, are generally only

feed babies: *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft: being a collection of documents, for the most part never printed, illustrating the history of science in this country before the Norman Conquest*, ed. by O. Cockayne, 3 vols (London, 1864–66, reprint 1965), I, pp. 64–68.

²⁵ Crawford, 'Children', p. 86.

²⁶ Stoodley, 'Cradle', pp. 459–63.

²⁷ The absence of toys and possible children's games is discussed by Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 140–43. There have been observable distinctions in gender- and age-related 'kits' elsewhere: see also Mejsholm, this volume. Stoodley has observed a gradual progression towards an adult kit: 'Cradle', p. 465. This would support the assumption that children were seen as a special group that step-by-step attained adult status.

²⁸ The onset of puberty, however, varies according to perceptions of childhood and adulthood. Modern girls have their first menses much earlier than their grandmothers, which may be the result of a better diet, but also of an earlier sexualisation. The age of the menarche may have thus been much later for Anglo-Saxon girls. Stoodley has also observed that 'markings of mothering', such as girdle items, occur on women in their mid-twenties which may suggest that childbirth was delayed until the late teens. This, however, is regarded as unlikely by Stoodley in the light of a lack of effective birth control methods: 'Cradle', p. 466.

²⁹ In the later Anglo-Saxon laws the age of legal responsibility lies at twelve years of age, e.g., the Laws of Athelstan sets the legal age for thieves to twelve years: Lieberman, I, pp. 150–51.

given to individuals between twenty and fifty years of age,³⁰ when they could have been economically independent.

A Child's Place?

In a kin-based society, the onset of sexual maturity may have been regarded as an important step, since it signifies the expected procreation of the kin into the next generation. However, dead children are unable to contribute to the continuation of the family and their place in the chain of generations has been cut short. Perhaps the answer to the occurrence of so many unfurnished burials for young children in pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries is the position that these children held within their families. Parents with surviving children, who could inherit the status of their ancestors and thus secure the continuation of the kin group, may not have felt the same need to afford the dead child the insignia of social belonging, which would be different for the burial of the eldest or only child. However, this does not mean that children in unfurnished burials were loved less or regarded as inferior, just that they may be survived by other siblings who will carry on the line and be invested with the family's wealth. The more highly furnished burials may mark an end of a chain of generations, where the wealth may be part of the inheritance that may have otherwise passed to this member of the group.³¹ Usually there are only very few elaborate infant burials in cemeteries, as, for example, grave F2 Marina Drive, Bedford, where a small child was buried with a silver necklace and pendant, or Grave 107 at Edix Hill (Cambridgeshire), where a five-year-old was buried with a spear, which he would have never been able to wield in life.³² These children are buried with expensive 'adult objects', but these do not automatically make them adults. Instead, they are given the status markers which befit adult members of their group and which may highlight the gap their passing has left in the chain of generations.

³⁰ Stoodley, 'Cradle', table 5, p. 460.

³¹ It is, however, unclear whether grave goods represent the part of inheritance that is 'owned' by the dead (*Totentil*).

³² *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Edix Hill*; for the symbolism of weapon burial see Heinrich Härke, 'Changing Symbols in a Changing Society: Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite in the Seventh Century', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo*, ed. by Martin Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 149–65.

The Spacing of the Dead

Objects are included with cremation and inhumation burials alike. Generally, inhumation became the dominant form of burial towards the sixth century. While cremation sites often contain a large number of burials,³³ inhumation cemeteries are smaller, and it has been argued that they served individual communities, rather than larger groups. In many cases, there is a disparity of numbers, such as an imbalance between men and women or old and young individuals.³⁴ Most Anglo-Saxon cemeteries seem to house burial populations in the age group between 18–40 years, with notable exceptions of monastic cemeteries, such as Nazeingbury, Hartlepool or Monkwearmouth. The absence of respective numbers of older people has led to the assumption that Anglo-Saxon lives were much shorter than those of today. As in the case of children, the taphonomy needs to be borne in mind.³⁵ At Hartlepool there are several cemeteries, and the site at Church Walk seems to have been reserved for elderly males, indicating that this was the burial ground for monks from this community.³⁶

It should be considered that many sites could not be excavated in full, since they are often obscured by later structures, and it is possible that zones containing children or the old may have thus been overlooked. The segregation observed at some post-conversion sites poses the question whether early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries had been ‘village cemeteries’ in which all members of the community were buried. Decisions of where the dead should have their final rest may have changed over time, and may differ between an inhumation site of the earliest period of settlement from around the middle of the fifth century, and a final-phase grave field of the middle of the seventh century. It is feasible that once settlements are established, there is a greater choice of burial options in surrounding areas, which may have influenced the development of smaller local cemeteries. A clustering of certain

³³ The most impressive example is Spong Hill in North Norfolk with nearly 4,000 individuals.

³⁴ Stoodley, ‘Cradle’, p. 458. See, for example, Butler’s Field, Lechlade, Gloucestershire with a high number of women. Generally, these are slight imbalances.

³⁵ T. Waldron, *Counting the Dead: The Epidemiology of Skeletal Populations* (Chichester: 1994), 14. See also by the same author: *Paleoepidemiology: The Epidemiology of Human Remains* (Walnut Creek, 2007), pp. 25–37.

³⁶ C. Loveluck, ‘The Early Medieval Cemeteries’ in *Anglo-Saxon Hartlepool and the Foundation of English Christianity: an Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Monastery*, by C. Loveluck (Hartlepool, 2007), p. 93.

groups at some sites seems to indicate that here, as well, some form of selection was at hand.³⁷

It is possible that when there is a choice for burial options not every cemetery will necessarily have to include children or the elderly. For example, the population at Norton (Cleveland) was very young, almost 45% of the dead were under the age of 25 years, but equally showed a low number of children below the age of four,³⁸ which suggests that the people of Norton buried the very young and the mature elsewhere. The question is, of course, where the bodies of the young and the old were deposited and what social stratification, if any, was expressed in the separation of the dead. But given that large numbers of Anglo-Saxons inhumation cemeteries could not be fully excavated because they are often located under other structures or have been partially destroyed prior to discovery, it is possible that burial plots for the young and the infirm may not yet be detected. An example for such age-related burial plots is the cemetery of Great Chesterford (Essex), dated from the late fifth to early seventh century.³⁹ The site was flooded by the extension of the lake prior to excavation, which obliterated part of the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery. However, the remainder shows that there are clusters of burials as, for example, the burial of infants and young children, or the spacing of male or female burials. The exact dating of infant graves is complex, since they are almost all unfurnished, but the earliest burials, dated to the second half of the fifth century, are east-west in orientation. Clusters of neonates or infants at the west side seem to be a feature of the late fifth, early sixth century, and one cluster of neonates in the eastern corner has been dated by Grave 136 as belonging to the sixth century.⁴⁰ Unless we expect that these children are the unfortunate victims of an epidemic, this clustering indicates that certain areas of this cemetery were reserved for child burials. It also suggests that there is some form of internal age structure even among children, where neonates were not often buried next to older children and seem

³⁷ A clustering of age groups has been observed at Westgarth Gardens, Suffolk; *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Burial: Morning Thorpe, Spong Hill, Bergh Apton and Westgarth Gardens*, ed. by K. Penn and B. Bruggmann, EAA 119 (Dereham, 2007), p. 88.

³⁸ *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Norton, Cleveland*, ed. by S. Sherlock and Martin Welch, CBA Research Report, 82 (York, 1992), pp. 110 and 118 respectively.

³⁹ *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Great Chesterford, Essex*, ed. by V.I. Evison, CBA Research Report, 91 (York, 1994).

⁴⁰ Graves 133, 136, 153, 154, 155, 156. Dating has been on the basis of objects.

to belong to a different group.⁴¹ This indicates that these are not the offspring of just one extended family group, but possibly a communal space for the dead children of the community. Similar observations of clusters of child burials have been made at other sites, such as the Cambridgeshire cemetery of Barrington, Edix Hill.⁴² The cemetery of Apple Down (Sussex), dated to the late fifth, sixth century contains a number of child burials, which seem to be gathered around a central space.⁴³ This site also houses a sizeable elderly population, 35 out of a 126 bodies were aged in the forty years and older group. Most elderly bodies are buried on the western side of the cemetery, and here, as well, are clusters of people in the same age group, notably a party of elderly men clustered around one of the rich weapon burials of this site (G 63). This grave also contains the cremated remains of a child or young adult. To the south of this group is the burial of a younger male, whose bones showed swollen shafts and spongy surfaces (G 152), suggesting wide-spread disease.⁴⁴ This burial, which is one of three containing remains of a shield, is bordered by that of a young child. Some people at Apple Down were placed inside four-poster structures. These were mainly cremations, but G 99, dated to the seventh-century, which housed another mature male with shield remains, also contained the remains of an earlier burial of a child which was just weeks old. What we are seeing is that old age or disease is not necessarily detriment to being buried with high-status goods,⁴⁵ but that the spacing of bodies in the grave yard may be age-dependent. However, just like children, elderly men and women are also often buried with fewer rank-indicative objects. The spacing of these cases suggests that an overarching concept among individuals thus grouped together is that they are not in the prime of life; lacking health, maturity or the strength of youth. Just as there are variable degrees of vulnerability among the young and the impaired, this could also be extended to old age. Thus traditional

⁴¹ Stoodley has identified age delineations around two years of age (when most children do get some form of 'grave good'), and again at the age of five years for girls: 'Cradle', pp. 457–63.

⁴² *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Edix Hill*, p. 296.

⁴³ *Chichester Excavations VII*, ed. by A. Down and M. Welch (Chichester, 1990).

⁴⁴ While the relative chronology is complex, all of these graves have been dated to the sixth century; Down and Welch, *Chichester Excavation*, pp. 107–09, 213.

⁴⁵ Stoodley has also shown that there are differences in weapon burial: older men are given axes and seaxes, rather than swords and spears, and the proportion of burials with weapons halves in the older male groups, 'Cradle', p. 462.

age-related studies of grave goods may be obscured by aspects of social rather than biological age.⁴⁶

The burial of some children with elaborate grave goods suggests that the status or identity of an adult can be transferred to the young.⁴⁷ The question is whether there is an inverted process in which some people will never attain the legal and social status of an adult, or whether this status can be revoked. An intriguing occurrence of Anglo-Saxon inhumation rites is when children are interred alongside, or even on top of, the sick. The complexities of burial space, as examined above, seems to suggest that people who are buried together, seem to share similarities, be at age, status, or even kin relation.

Whereas the truncation of some burials may be explained by a lack of grave markers or cemetery organisation,⁴⁸ the reason behind multiple inhumations is even more obscure. Nick Stoodley claims that multiple burials, either in the same grave or on top of each other, occur for a number of reasons, one of which is a scarcity of space, but many do not follow this pattern.⁴⁹ In other cases graves are large enough to accommodate more than one person, and in a few cases bodies are buried 'stacked' on top of each other. Young children are more likely to have been buried with an adult, and in many cases this may not have been a family member. Stoodley observes that impaired individuals seem to be paired with a second burial, but that a combination of two people with the same condition does not seem to occur.⁵⁰

An example of a multiple inhumation containing a sick adult and a child come from the fifth- to sixth-century burial ground at Beck-

⁴⁶ Stoodley has observed that the girdle items, which disappear after childbearing age from Anglo-Saxon female burials, are reduced at a different pace and he speculates that this may dependent on the time when the children leave the care of their mothers; 'Cradle', p. 467.

⁴⁷ An interesting observation was made by Stoodley, who claims that women with definite female kits in contrast to less gender-specific burials seem to have been protected from starvation in early childhood (which is evident in a lack of enamel hypoplasia on the teeth), which means that their status was confirmed at an early age: 'Cradle', p. 468.

⁴⁸ Despite the fact that most sites exhibit a careful layout of graves.

⁴⁹ 'Multiple Burials, Multiple Meanings? Interpreting the Early Anglo-Saxon Multiple Interment', in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, ed. by S. Lucy and A. Reynolds, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph, 17 (London, 2002), pp. 103–21.

⁵⁰ 'Multiple Burials', p. 120. His research is based on an examination of 245 multiple inhumations from 59 sites.

ford, Hereford and Worcester, containing two distinct cemeteries.⁵¹ Bone preservation is good at one site [A] but poor at the other [B]. Cemetery A, the smaller of the two, is supposed to be the burial place of a leading family or kin group (the skeletons shared a number of physiological features and graves were arranged in a similar fashion). Two of the skeletons suffered from leprosy, graves 8 and 11. Both were overlain by small children. At King's Worthy, Hampshire, a late fifth- to mid-seventh-century cemetery, there is a plethora of different diseases, but not all of the afflicted are accompanied by a child inhumation.⁵² Grave 20, however, a suspected leper, is overlain by cremation 14, which contained the remains of a child. The grave is a little apart from other inhumations, but the nearest, G 19, is that of a ten-year-old girl. The report from King's Worthy is lacking a definitive chronology since it was published after the death of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, who had worked on the site, so it is not clear when these people were buried. King's Worthy not only has a number of child inhumations, but also contains a cluster of people with various afflictions, such as a man with a malformation of his shoulder and left arm (Grave 38), who was surrounded by people with illnesses.

One site where the chronology is very clear is Barrington, Edix Hill. This excavation report also contains a most detailed osteological report. On the west side of the cemetery there is a group of people with various afflictions. The burials which could be dated from this group suggest a sixth-century context. Grave 65 of this group of graves contains the inhumation of a man, with evidence for a number of congenial and traumatic afflictions, with that of a child. Grave 94 is the inhumation of a child, with evidence for infection on the skeletal remains, in proximity to Grave 95, which contained a woman with infection, and particularly close to Grave 93, the burial of a leper and Grave 66, which contained a man with tuberculosis. The clustering of these burials suggests that this part of the sixth-century cemetery was reserved for the interment of people with disease. There appears to be a second cluster of child graves cutting or overlying other burials on the northwest side, dated to the sixth century. At least one of these graves appears to be a charnel grave (Grave 80), which may indicate reburial of bones at a later stage.

⁵¹ *Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries at Beckford, Hereford and Worcester*, ed. by V.I. Evison and P. Hill, CBA Research Report, 103 (London, 1996).

⁵² *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, near Winchester, Hampshire*, ed. by S. Chadwick Hawkes with G. Grainger (Oxford, 2003).

Some of these graves were robbed, and the pathology does not indicate unusual ailments on the bones. In some instances, multiple inhumations may not be in the space of the same grave, but arranged as overlying burials. Inhumation 120 at West Heslerton (North Yorkshire), the burial of a female adult from the middle phase of the cemetery (AD 550–600) is overlaying the prone burial of a young girl (Grave 118). The grave is not very well furnished and it is unclear why they should be buried like this.⁵³ A similar example from Edix Hill implies that such arrangements may suggest that a possible disease was suffered by at least one of the occupants in the grave. At this site one of the most high status graves (Grave 18) was the seventh-century bed burial of a young woman with leprosy. The body is overlain by the burial of an adult and child. The precision of these secondary inhumations make this an unlikely accidental reuse of the grave.

It seems that infectious disease may be a criterion for such a burial combination, but in other cases this is less clear. In some cases the child is buried with people who are elderly: at Mill Hill (Kent) is the triple inhumation of a mature woman, a man of similar age, and a juvenile who was wedged between the two facing adults (Grave 105). The head of the young person was placed at the foot end facing northwards. The woman of this burial has had some terrific accident when a tooth was extracted. A large part of the mandible had been broken off and she suffered subsequent chronic infection. At Apple Down Grave 93 contains an elderly man and woman buried between an elaborate four-poster structure, disturbing the inhumation of a baby.

The care that was afforded the leprous girl from Edix Hill is indicative of a much more inclusive attitude towards disease in early Anglo-Saxon England. The afflicted is, despite her condition, given a grand burial. This poses questions about the position of her companions in death. There is no obvious family and it is hardly possible that the grand burial would be conveniently used for the interment of other people, especially since these seem to be less well off. It may be likely that this was a servant of the young woman and her child, in which

⁵³ The bone preservation at West Heslerton was poor and there is no discernible pathology; *West Heslerton: the Anglian Cemetery*, ed. by C. Haughton and D. Powlesland, 2 vols (Yedingham, 1999). Another case from Yorkshire in which there are two facing burials is the very rich burial of a mature woman at Sewerby, Yorkshire, who is overlain by the prone burial of a young woman (G 49): S. Hirst, *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Sewerby, Yorkshire* (York 1985).

case some form of caring is indicated here. It may even be feasible to consider that both the leprous woman and the child were seen as belonging to the same group of people: individuals who were in need of special care.

After the conversion to Christianity, when the custom of grave-sharing is largely abandoned, there are still occasions where diseased people were interred among rows of child inhumations, as is the case at the late Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Raunds Furnells. There, where a possible leper was buried to the south of the church positioned near the so-called 'eavesdrip' burials, close to the south side of the first church, an area which contained mainly infant inhumations.⁵⁴ Eavesdrip burials may be regarded as special spaces, since the ground is sanctified by water running off the roof of the church.⁵⁵ The combination burial of an adult with disease or impairment and a child has been observed at other sites as well. For example, the possibly mortuary chapel at Flixborough (Lincolnshire) contained the burial of a child together with the inhumation of a woman with a terminal illness.⁵⁶

In a number of excavated Anglo-Saxon churchyards, children are buried in special plots, often close to the church itself. Jo Buckberry has observed that infant clusters are located around other Anglo-Saxon churches, such as a group interred close to the walls of St Peter, Barton-on-Humber (North Lincolnshire) and under the floor of St Mary's, Lincoln.⁵⁷ At the Middle Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Brandon, Staunton Meadow (Suffolk),⁵⁸ the graveyard to the north of the church contained a high proportion of infants or juveniles. The cemetery at Hartlepool seems to have had three distinct burial spaces, one for the religious, one for the laity and one for children.⁵⁹ The absence of an identifiable

⁵⁴ *Raunds Furnells: the Anglo-Saxon Church and Churchyard*, ed. by A. Boddington with Graham Cadman (London, 1996).

⁵⁵ Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 87. See also J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), p. 471, n. 201.

⁵⁶ Loveluck, pers. comm.; see also: Loveluck, 'Wealth, Waste and Conspicuous Consumption: Flixborough and its Importance for Middle and Late Saxon Rural Settlement Studies', in *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain, Essays in Honour of Rosemary Cramp*, ed. by H. Hamerow and A. McGregor (Oxford, 2001), pp. 79–130 (pp. 85–86).

⁵⁷ J. Buckberry, 'On Sacred Ground: Social Identity and Churchyard Burial in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, c. 700–1100', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 14 (2007), 117–124 (p. 124).

⁵⁸ R.D. Carr, A. Tester and P. Murphy, 'The Middle Saxon Settlement at Staunton Meadow, Brandon', *Antiquity*, 62 (1988), 371–7 (p. 374).

⁵⁹ Loveluck, 'Anglo-Saxon Hartlepool', p. 205.

church building should not detract from the fact that children may have been placed in a sacred space.⁶⁰ Similarly the east side of the cemetery of Whithorn Priory (Dumfries and Galloway) was densely packed with infant and child graves. This development falls into the eighth century, and these children were, in the words of Peter Hill, too young to be members of the ecclesiastical community, and may have been drawn from the lay population.⁶¹ During the eighth century Whithorn became famous for miracle healings, as described in the Latin verse life of St Ninian. Saints and their cult places must have always attracted a number of the sick, which could not be cured elsewhere, and it is thus not surprising to see a greater number of diseased skeletons or young children in these places, since both may have been taken to these places in hope of a cure or, at least, posthumous care.⁶²

The Living Dead

Victoria Thompson has queried the ‘finality’ of death in late Anglo-Saxon England.⁶³ The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons may have introduced a concept of life after death, in which physical death was separated from the death of the soul. In this understanding, death was regarded a liminal state which continued beyond the grave. Thus the dead could, for example, still experience the physical tortures of hell. Sarah Semple has examined images of the damned in the *Harley Psalter* (BL, Ms Harley 603).⁶⁴ She argues that an innovative feature of Anglo-Saxon illustrations is the depiction of the dead in their mounds, and especially of the dead who are damned. One illustration in particular, folio 72^r, is especially intriguing. The figures in this image have their feet cut off. The removing of hands or feet was a punishment for repeat crimes,⁶⁵ but in this illustration one of the figures is holding an infant child towards the figure of Christ in a mandorla above the

⁶⁰ Loveluck, ‘Anglo-Saxon Hartlepool’, p. 205.

⁶¹ P. Hill, ‘Chapter 2’, in *Whithorn and St Ninian: The Excavation of a Monastic Town 1984–91* ed. by P. Hill (Stroud, 1997), p. 45.

⁶² See Sellevold, this volume.

⁶³ V. Thompson, ‘The View from the Edge: Dying, Power and Vision in Late Anglo-Saxon England’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 12 (2003), 92–97.

⁶⁴ ‘Illustrations of Damnation in Late Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 32 (2003), 321–45.

⁶⁵ 2 Cnut, 30.4 Liebermann, I, p. 333. Sally Crawford, however interprets the same image as a baptismal scene where the feet of the persons are dangling in the water: *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 86.

mound. Surely this child is not supposed to have committed a criminal offence? Rather, the child and the ‘damned’ appear to require the same salvation which may come as part of divine absolution. The most likely explanation is that the child in this scene depicts an infant which may have been unbaptised at the time of death, together with people who are impaired by whatever sin they have committed.

The question of when a child was part of the community in the post-conversion period is closely linked to baptism.⁶⁶ Audrey Meaney has recently claimed that the term *hæðen* (‘heathen’) is also used for unbaptised children in Old English penitentials.⁶⁷ The Church tried to implement the need for baptism early on. The seventh-century law code of Ine require an infant to be baptised within thirty days of birth, the later *Laws of the Northumbrian Priests* only allow a period of nine days, which may be due to the fact that the network of churches and priests had become denser.⁶⁸ Ine’s laws also state that parents whose child dies without baptism after this period should forfeit all their possessions.⁶⁹ The reason for such negligence may not just be forgetful or unbelieving parents, as Sally Crawford has indicated, but that the rites of baptism and death rituals were regarded as one and the same by the laity.⁷⁰ Baptism may have been regarded as a part of the ritual of the last rites and may therefore have been postponed by parents who feared some form of causality between both rituals. It is quite feasible that the high amount of infant burials at some church sites may be those of children who have died without obtaining baptism, and who are now in need of increased spiritual assistance. The seriousness of baptism is indicated in the laws of Wihtried, which state that a priest who misses the baptism of a sick person or is too drunk to perform this duty should lose his office.⁷¹

In a society based on ‘exchange’, where wrongs can be righted through compensation, it is feasible that once an injury has been ‘paid for’, the matter is closed for a community. However, the death of a child or an impairment cannot be compensated by any living person.

⁶⁶ See Mejsholm and Sellevold, this volume.

⁶⁷ ‘Old English legal and penitential penalties for “heathenism”’, in *Anglo-Saxon Studies: Presented to Cyril Roy Hart*, ed. by S. Keynes and A. Smyth (Dublin, 2006), pp. 127–58 (pp. 141–43).

⁶⁸ Ine 2, Liebermann, p. 90; *Northumbrian Priests* 10, Liebermann I, p. 359.

⁶⁹ Ine 2:1, Liebermann I, p. 90.

⁷⁰ *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 87.

⁷¹ Liebermann I, p. 12.

Augustine and later Ælfric both stress that the bodies of the sick and the deformed will be made perfect after judgement day.⁷² Assistance may be given in form of prayers of intercession by the living relatives, which are made even more effective if the bodies are placed near the spaces in which saints, prayers, and the Christian communities united near the altars of churches, where the celebration of the Eucharist connects the living and the dead through the recollection of names and prayers. By this reasoning the imperfect, whether in body or soul, can be helped on their path to perfection.

Evidence of congenial abnormalities comes from a number of sites. Among the excavated bodies are adults with missing arm and shoulder-bones (Worthy Park), people who have foreshortened extremities due to polio, hydrocephali (Nazeingbury, Essex), and evidence for trisomy 21 (Down's Syndrome, Nazeingbury). Additionally there are occasional hints that parents actively sought to find solutions for children with congenital impairment. Children with a disability were often reared into adulthood, but it should be observed that at pre-Christian sites, persons with impairment have generally fewer grave goods than other burials, which may indicate a lower status, or may even represent that they were unable to perform tasks that their able-bodied contemporaries could do. Fewer artefacts may correspond to a diminished 'earning power', if we accept that objects such as weaving swords or spindle whorls are badges of a person's occupation or income. Alternatively, as seen in some pre-Christian sites, diseased people and children could be interred as separate groups of their own, such at Nazeingbury where four of the skeletons with the greatest pathology are buried well away from other inhumations, but close to the east end of Church 1.⁷³ Among them is a fifty-year-old man who was unable to walk because of a congenial abnormality of his legs. The spacing of the dead in groups, as well as the proximity to the church are significant, since they show that they were regarded as a separate category in a privileged surrounding.

It may be significant that cemeteries which exhibit a paucity of people with impairment also contain few infant burials, such as Mill Hill, Kent. This wealthy sixth-century site contained a high mortality

⁷² *Enchiridion* ed. by J. Van Hout (Turnhout, Brepols) 4:442–43; see also *Civitate Dei*, 22:12: Homily xx, Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies I*, ed. by P. Clemoes, Early English Text Society, 2nd series 17 (Oxford, 1997), p. 344.

⁷³ P.J. Huggins, 'Excavations of a Belgic and Romano-British Farm and Middle Saxon Cemetery and Church at Nazeingbury, Essex 1975–6, *Essex Archaeology and History* (1978), 29–117 (p. 51).

of young children, but few under-tuos and very little pathology. This may be an accident to preservation, but it poses the question of when children are regarded to be seen as members of the family group. For example, at the Bedfordshire cemetery of Marina Drive a 'young child' is buried with silver jewellery, and the double inhumation of an eight- and a twelve-year-old contains a rare work-box and quartz crystal, objects which are unusual with this age group. At the same time a man who must have either been very accident-prone, or a right bruiser in his life (his right hand is cut off—carefully placed into his grave on top of his thigh—and he has a healed broken nose and collarbone), is buried amidst a row of children and young adults, one of which is laid out prone. Prone burial has been explained, among other reasons, as resulting from a fear of the living that the dead may return (and the burial face down would thus confuse the undead body). While such explanations are based on pure conjecture, it should be noted that prone burial is unusual and is a significant divergence from the norm.⁷⁴ The reason for a child, buried in adult kit, and the impaired man being buried among children suggests that they may have been regarded as belonging to the same group. The common denominator that all of them share may be that they are 'minor', either because of their age, their legal position or status.

The paucity of child inhumations in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries may have a number of reasons. Either they were seen as a special group in need of a special place, which may remain undetected up to now; or perhaps because their status as 'minors' would not warrant them a place in a kin-based space. This, however, does not indicate that children were not loved or cherished by their parents, or even 'discarded'. The normal age at death of so many people with an impairment shows that children with congenial abnormalities were loved and protected by those who cared for them, and it should be assumed that their healthy peers were equally cherished. The graves of children often have touching additions, which may be status markers, but may also be interpreted as expressions of extended care, such as a pot of duck's eggs in Grave 69 at Holywell Row, or a pot of eggs at Grave 121 at Great Chesterfield. Food remains in graves are not unusual,⁷⁵ and here

⁷⁴ It is always possible that a person has been accidentally buried in a prone position, especially if this is a shroud burial and the body may have slipped or turned when being placed in the ground.

⁷⁵ C. Lee, *Feasting the Dead: Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon Burial Rituals* (Woodbridge, 2007).

the careful layout of food items in a vessel seems to suggest a form of posthumous 'feeding' of the children.

In death, children and adults with a disability seem to be given a special place, and in some cases this may be the same plot for both groups. This by no means signifies that they were regarded as lesser people, but that they may have been regarded as belonging to similar categories. There is a certain liminality about children and people with a severe impairment. Both groups are unable to perform the duties of adult members of society, be it because they are physically unable, as children or severely impaired people, or because they are not allowed to do so. The fact that they may not be able to perform in the same way as others may result possibly in a diminished legal status. While laws on the compensation of acquired impairments are many in Anglo-Saxon law codes, there are no specific laws that relate to the status of those who were born with impairment. The extent as to which they were regarded as full members of the community remains unclear. Perhaps cemeteries such as Great Chesterford with its high number of infants represent a place in which children were included as part of the community of the dead, in opposition to other sites where they were left out, perhaps because they were regarded as a separate group. The problems associated with defining 'childhood' in Anglo-Saxon England from burial archaeology and the legal documents may be complicated by the fact that some individuals required care for a longer period of time and may have been counted in the category of 'child' for longer.

The conversion to Christianity required a prolonged attendance of the living for the dead in form of intercession for the soul, and now care was required by all members of the society, which was negotiated through a complex system of mutual benefits. The legacies paid to churches were often made in exchange for intercession and remembrance. Churchyard burial for much of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period was only one of the options of burying the dead, and it seems to have been a privilege reserved for an elite.⁷⁶ Perhaps the special spaces for children and seriously impaired at vantage points in Christian cemeteries underline that they were regarded to be in need of further assistance, which could not be offered by their kin alone, but through the intervention of those who traditionally cared for the needs of the soul and increasingly the body as well: men and women of the Church.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Hadley, 'Negotiating Gender', pp. 310–11.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD AT THE SYNCRETIC CEMETERY OF FJÄLKINGE—A CASE STUDY

Lotta Mejsholm

Introduction

It is a paradox to study the introductory phase of human life through archaeological objects that reflect the death of the young, but, by studying variations in burial practice, age-related structures that are valid in life can be detected in death. ‘Childhood’ is approached here as a social construction defined by and therefore also reflecting contemporary society. One can argue that the definition of childhood is likely to be affected by radical cultural change, such as the Christianisation process in Scandinavia. In pre-Christian Viking-Age cemeteries infant graves are rarely found, whereas they are numerous in highly formalised Christian medieval cemeteries.¹ In order to examine whether this major shift is related to the advent of Christianity, it is useful to examine cemetery records that express a reciprocal presence of both pre-Christian and Christian ideologies. Given the fact that the complex process of Christianisation advanced at varying speeds throughout Scandinavia, evoking varying material expressions in different regions,² one needs to approach each burial site as a closed phenomenon comparable only to itself. This paper will concentrate upon the evidence of the syncretic³ cemetery

¹ Elisabeth Iregren, ‘Avbruten amning blev barnens död?—Ett försök till tolkning av Västerhusmaterialet’, *Populär arkeologi*, 2 (1988), 22–25 (pp. 23–24). Kristina Jonsson, ‘Bland barnaföderskor, spädbarn och vuxna barn—social och religiös kontroll speglad i gravmaterial från Västerhus’, *META*, 4 (1999), 12–35 (pp. 21–23).

² Jens Peter Schjødt, ‘Nogle overvejelser over begrebet “Religionsskifte” med henblik på en problematisering af termens brug i forbindelse med overgangen til kristendommen i Norden’, in *Medeltidens fødsel*, ed. by Anders Andrén, Symposier på Krapperrups borg, 1 (Lund, 1989), pp. 187–201; Anne-Sofie Gräslund, *Ideologi och mentalitet. Om religionsskiftet i Skandinavien från en arkeologisk horisont*, Occasional Papers in Archaeology, 29 (Uppsala, 2001), pp. 19–27.

³ The term ‘syncretism’ is used in the following in connection to burial customs showing a combination of both pre-Christian and Christian elements, as an expression of an ongoing ideological change as ascribed to the process of Christianisation in Late Viking-Age Sweden. Compare Anders Hultgård, ‘Religiös förändring, kontinuitet och ackulturation/synkretism i vikingatidens och medeltidens skandinaviska religion’, in

at Fjälkinge, Sweden, dating from the tenth and eleventh century, and thus contemporary with the period of conversion.⁴ The most prominent features of the cemetery are the high frequency of child burials, a rate generally higher than what is found in pre-Christian Viking-Age cemeteries, and the syncretic or mixed character of the mortuary practices at the site. It is thereby a suitable case study to determine the potential influence of Christianity on the construction of childhood.

The Syncretic Cemetery of Fjälkinge

In Scania, in southern Sweden, the Late Viking-Age cemetery at Fjälkinge was discovered in 1992 as a result of a rescue excavation, with the graves dating to *c.* AD 900–1050.⁵ The excavation uncovered 121 graves containing 127 individuals of which seventy-eight were osteologically estimated to be children under the age of twelve years at death.⁶ The graves were extremely well preserved and advantageous

Kontinuitet i kult och tro från vikingatid till medeltid, ed. by Bertil Nilsson, Projektet Sveriges kristnande, 1 (Uppsala, 1992), 49–104 (pp. 49–51); Lars Ersgård, 'Religionsskiftet som social förändring', in *Religion från stenålder till medeltid*, ed. by Kerstin Engdahl and Anders Kaliff, Riksantikvarieämbetet arkeologiska undersökningar, 19 (Linköping, 1996), 9–17 (p. 9). Any negative connotation that has been ascribed to the term 'syncretic' as indicating 'un-pure faith' in previous research is not acknowledged here. Compare, for instance, Anders Kaliff and Olof Sundqvist, *Oden och Mithraskulten. Religiös acculturation under romersk järnålder och folkvandlingstid*, Occasional Papers in Archaeology, 35 (Uppsala, 2004) pp. 11–12.

⁴ Syncretic character in burial customs is noted from different periods, depending on when and how the Christianization process evolved. In the Viking-Age proto town of Birka, these tendencies can be seen as early as the ninth century, related to the early missionary activities on the island. Anne-Sofie Gräslund, *The Burial Customs. A Study of the Graves on Björkö*, Birka Untersuchungen und Studien, 4 (Stockholm, 1980).

⁵ All information on the cemetery in the following case study is, unless otherwise noted, based on the excavation report: Bertil Helgesson, *Rapport, arkeologisk undersökning 1990 Fjälkinge 35:60 m.fl. Fjälkinge socken fornlämnning 18 och 19*, Länsmuseet i Kristianstad 1996, 5 (Kristianstad, 1996).

⁶ Bertil Helgesson estimated the total number of individuals to 128, including a foetus found between the legs of a woman. This foetus is excluded here since the grave was most probably constructed for a pregnant woman. For discussion of coffin deliveries, see Berit J. Sellevold, 'Fødsel og død. Kvinners dødelighet i forbindelse med svangerskap og fødsel I forhistorisk tid og middelalder, belyst fra studier av skjelettmaterialer', in *Kvinnors rosengård. Medeltidskvinnors liv och hälsa, lust och barnafödande. Föredrag från nordiska tvärvetenskapliga symposiet I Århus aug. 1985 och Visby sept. 1987*, ed. by Hedda Gunneng et al., Skriftserie från centrum för kvinnoforskning vid Stockholms universitet, 1 (Stockholm, 1989), 79–96 (pp. 87–94).

conditions for excavation and documentation allowed a close study of burial rites at the site.

In Fjälkinge, the graves are all unmarked inhumations, with or without grave goods. About 50% of the skulls were found generally oriented to the north or north-northeast, and about 40% to the west or west-northwest. A slight, clockwise disorientation in both groups has been ascribed to the presence of the 'Fjälkinge backe', an impressive geological ridge situated north-northeast of the cemetery, apparently also influencing the positioning of the medieval church and the directions of the first streets of the village.⁷

The excavators Helgesson and Arcini have identified three general burial types in Fjälkinge based on body orientation and grave goods: one exhibiting east/west-orientated graves, generally lacking grave-goods and most often of a supine interment; one which mainly exhibits north/south-oriented graves, combined with grave-goods and varied body positions; and one exhibiting different combinations of the elements from the two first groups. Helgesson and Arcini have proposed a chronological explanation for the differing expressions in burial rites as a consequence of increasing Christian influences in the region.⁸

Discussions of Christian influences in the Scandinavian burial custom have mainly been concerned with external features like replacement of mounds with unmarked graves or square-shaped flat stone-settings and east/west orientation, and internal features like the absence of grave goods and animals interred with the body, and the treatment of the body.

Generally speaking, east-west oriented graves are held to exhibit Christian influence. The positioning of the body and the placing of the head to the west have been ascribed to the Christian belief in resurrection: the dead, rising from their graves, will see their redeemer as he comes with the morning light in the east.⁹

Concerning the absence of grave goods in the burial rite, although it is true that the amount of grave goods gradually decreases during the conversion period, the correlation between grave goods and the

⁷ Bertil Helgesson and Caroline Arcini, 'A Major Burial Ground Discovered at Fjälkinge. Reflections of Life in a Scanian Viking Village', *Lund Archaeological Review* (1996), pp. 51–61.

⁸ Helgesson and Arcini, 'A Major Burial Ground Discovered at Fjälkinge' (pp. 54–55).

⁹ Gräslund, *Ideologi och mentalitet*, pp. 44–47.

individual's personal status in pre-Christian contexts makes this distinction illusory as unaccompanied graves of individuals who lack an accentuated social position or status may be mistakenly interpreted as Christian-influenced interments. The presence or absence of grave goods is not a key factor when interpreting Christian and traditional elements in burial tradition, especially since there is no actual opposition to accompanied graves in Christian ideology. Since graves in church cemeteries are oriented east/west, with very few exceptions,¹⁰ however most often combined with lack of grave-goods and supine body positions, I find the east/west orientation to be a more substantial indicator of Christian burial ideology.

It has been argued that all three 'groups' of burial rites at Fjälkinge are contemporary, as indicated by datable grave goods and the location of graves on the site.¹¹ If indeed there are two ideologies present at the cemetery, one pre-Christian and one Christian, they were expressed simultaneously. Therefore, it is appropriate to approach these differences in burial rites as conscious acts within a syncretic framework. It becomes more productive to discuss what certain elements in these burial rites might represent in relation to this framework, rather than identifying 'Christian' or 'pagan' graves per se. When discussing ideological expressions in burial rites, structures of social character need to be considered, and, at Fjälkinge, it is significant that certain elements generally interpreted as pre-Christian or Christian are specific to graves of certain age groups.

Fjälkinge is unique because of the sheer number of infant and child burials in the cemetery. Sixty-five of the seventy-eight individuals under the age of twelve were infants under one year of age at death, which is an unusually high percentage of infants buried in a Viking-Age cemetery, but more characteristic to Christian church cemeteries.¹² It is, however, to be noted that the cemetery has probably not been totally

¹⁰ Peter Carelli, 'We are not Equal in the Face of Death. Profane Graves in Medieval Lund', in *Thirteen Essays on Medieval Artefacts*, ed. by Lars Ersgård, Papers of the Archaeological Institute, University of Lund 1993–1994, n.s. 10 (Lund, 1995), pp. 43–60 (p. 44).

¹¹ Fredrik Svanberg, *Death Rituals in South-East Scandinavia AD 800–1000. Decolonizing the Viking Age 2*, Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, 4th series, 24 (Stockholm, 2003), pp. 102–06.

¹² Compare Elisabeth Iregren, 'Avbruten amning blev barnens död?—Ett försök till tolkning av Västerhusmaterialet', (pp. 23–24). Kristina Jonsson, 'Bland barnaföderskor,

excavated, which might explain some of the aberrant distributions of age and sex among the individuals found, as old women and young infants are statistically over-represented in the current sample.¹³ But one must question whether the unusually high distribution of young infants, at the very least, is related in some way to the process of Christianisation, as will be discussed below.

The amount of grave goods interred with small children is generally low throughout the Scandinavian Iron Age,¹⁴ and this might be related more to how childhood is constructed rather than any specific manifestation of religious ideology. Thus, it is perhaps only natural that the youngest infants in the cemetery are not buried with grave goods. Yet, at Fjälkinge, there are two artefact types found in graves of mixed orientations which are specific to certain age groups. These different burial rites shall be examined with consideration for the biological age of the interred in order to discuss how concepts of social age are expressed in death at Fjälkinge.

Ceramic Vessels in Child Graves and the Meaning of the First Feeding

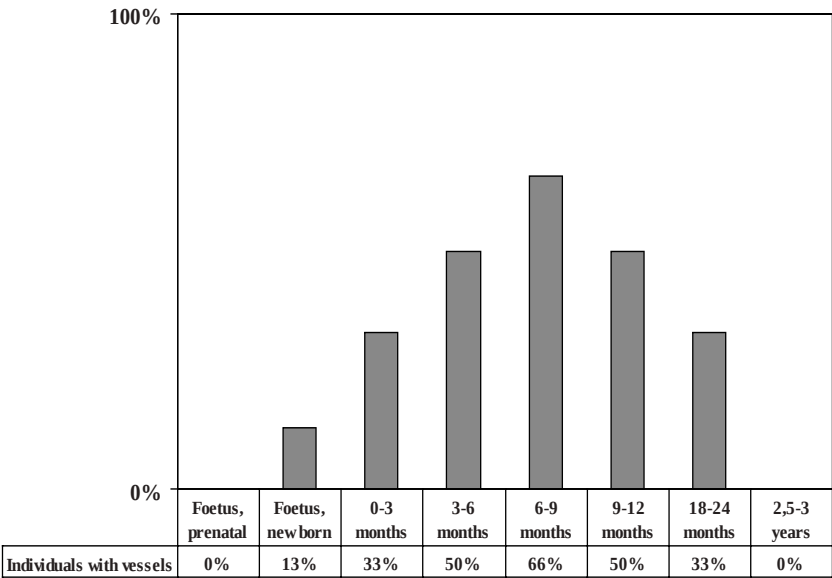
Artefacts in the graves at Fjälkinge are rather sparse, and even more so in the child graves, which is not unusual in the Viking Age. The child-related artefact types do not differ from those in adult graves, but with the exception of ceramic vessels. Thirty children aged newborn to two years were buried with a simple ceramic vessel at the head or feet, and one vessel was found in a grave-like construction with no trace of human remains. That these were found in child rather than adult graves suggests an age-related meaning and as such these vessels require further examination.

spädbarn och vuxna barn—social och religiös kontroll speglad i gravmaterial från Västerhus', (pp. 21–23).

¹³ Helgesson and Arcini, 'A Major Burial Ground Discovered at Fjälkinge' (pp. 54–55).

¹⁴ E.g. Berit J. Sellevold et al. *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, Prehistoric Man in Denmark, 3 (Copenhagen, 1984), p. 213.

Table 1. Distribution of vessels in relation to the children’s age. Number shows the percentage of children with vessels in relation to total number of individuals within the age group. About half of the children at the age of 0–3 months to 2 years were given vessels in the grave. Among prenatals and children older than 2 years of age the vessels are absent.



The vessels are homemade and for everyday use, comparable to the most common Viking-Age vessels, designated by Bertil Helgesson as type A IV.¹⁵ The shapes of several vessels are a bit unusual as these have square-shaped or oval-shaped mouths; two have square-shaped mouths with two spout-like shaped corners (fig. 1). The bellies of oval mouth-shaped vessels were occasionally formed like a dipper on one side (fig. 2). Four vessels were found to have knobs just below the mouth, probably to give a good grip. One third of the mouths were left free, seemingly to facilitate drinking (fig. 3). The dipper shape, the knobs and the spouts give the impression of a certain function: it seems as

¹⁵ Helgesson, *Rapport, arkeologisk undersökning 1990 Fjälkinge 35:60 m.fl. Fjälkinge socken fornlämning 18 och 19*, p. 9. Compare Dagmar Selling, *Wikingertidliche und Frümiddelalterliche Keramik in Schweden* (Stockholm, 1955), pp. 156–208.



Figure 1. Vessel with square shaped mouth and upper corners discreetly formed as spouts. Found in grave number 140 with a three- to six-month-old child.

Photo: L. Mejsholm with permission from the University of Lund.



Figure 2. Vessel with a dipper-shaped side. Found in grave 1092 with a nine-month-old child. *Photo:* L. Mejsholm with permission from the University of Lund.



Figure 3. Vessel with knobs covering $\frac{3}{4}$ of the mouth. Found in grave 268 with a child younger than three months of age. *Photo:* L. Mejsholm with permission from the University of Lund.

if these vessels were actually made specifically for feeding, preferably with liquid food.

Ceramic vessels are frequently found in Scandinavian Late Iron-Age cemeteries, but not prevalently associated with child graves. Containers for food and drink in graves are generally associated with ritual and social acts in producing, reproducing and acknowledging social relations.¹⁶ The appearance of vessels exclusively in child graves at Fjälkinge suggests, however, a somewhat age-specific aspect of the use of food containers in this milieu.

The lipids of seven vessels from the Fjälkinge child graves have recently been analysed by the Archaeological Research Laboratory at Stockholm University. The results suggest that these vessels had been filled with animal milk, in some cases mixed with vegetables. The proportion of milk substance differs statistically from comparable analyses of other Late Iron-Age burial ceramics.¹⁷ That these vessels did contain a diet suitable for ingestion by young children, combined with the functional forms of the vessels for feeding, is quite intriguing when one considers the symbolic character of the Late Iron-Age ritual burial meal.

Analyses of lipid substances from Late Iron-Age settlements and graves have revealed that the daily diet was mainly vegetarian, while the ritual burial meal was represented by a high percentage of animal lipids.¹⁸ Artefacts related to the preparation of meat and meat substances in a grave context have been found to be highly symbolic objects, representing a high social rank of the interred. It is thereby clear that the burial meal was not meant to correspond to the daily diet, but to bear a symbolic meaning. As they are used in the serving of the burial meal, utensils could have a parallel symbolic function in

¹⁶ E.g. Michael Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup. Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin, 1996). Sven Isaksson, *Food and Rank in the Early Medieval Time*, Thesis and Papers in Scientific Archaeology, 3 (Stockholm, 2000) pp. 21–28. Lotta Fernstål, *Delar av en grav och glimtar av en tid. Om yngre romersk järnålder, Tuna i Badelunda i Västmanland och personen i grav X*, Stockholm Studies in Archaeology, 32 (Stockholm, 2004) pp. 219–23.

¹⁷ Comparisons were made with materials from eastern Sweden, where all buried individuals were adults. The differences noted might therefore be due to either regional variation or the age of the interred: Sven Isaksson, *Analys av organiska lämningar i keramik från Fjälkinges barngravar*, Arkeologiska Forskningslaboratoriet, Uppdragsrapport 47 (Stockholm, 2007) pp. 8–9.

¹⁸ Isaksson, *Food and Rank in the Early Medieval Time*.

the grave.¹⁹ In the case of Fjälkinge, no older child or adult had been buried with vessels and the motive for the inclusion of these needs to be related to infants.

Several scholars have studied the pre-Christian Viking-Age initiation of newborn children.²⁰ The initiation seems to have been conducted through several rites of passage such as the pouring of water (*ausa vatni*),²¹ name giving and the presentation of the child to its father. The function of these rituals was to transform the child from a pre-person to a member of society, probably with slightly varying social aspects. One rather overlooked ritual, the baby's first feeding, is of relevance to the study of these vessels found at Fjälkinge, and a review of northern medieval law concerning the child's first feeding might be useful in this respect.²² Medieval Norwegian law indicates that if the child was to

¹⁹ Isaksson, *Food and Rank*, pp. 55–56.

²⁰ E.g. Ingjald Reichborn-Kjennerud, *Vår gamle trolldomsmedisin* 2, Skrifter utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo 3, (Oslo, 1933) pp. 83–91. Juha Pentikäinen *The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition: Nordic Dead-Child Beings, a Study in Comparative Religion*, FF Communications 202, (Helsinki, 1968) pp. 73–75. Else Mundal 'Barneutbering' *Norskraft* 56 (1987), 1–78 (pp. 54–56). Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, (London, 1995) pp. 81–89. Britt-Marie Näsström, 'I livets skeden: om passageriter i fornskandinavisk religion', in *Plats och praxis—studier av nordisk förkristen ritual*, ed. by Kristina Jennbert et al., *Vägar till Midgård* 2, (Lund, 2002) 69–86 (pp. 70–73).

²¹ The pre-Christian ritual of pouring water (*ausa vatni*) is distinguished from the Christian ritual of baptism (*skírn*) by the consistent use of terminology in the medieval textual sources: Johan Hovstad, *Mannen og samfundet: studiar i norrøn etikk* (Oslo, 1943) pp. 162–63.

²² Extant manuscripts of the Icelandic law *Grágás* are chiefly from the late thirteenth century, but it is likely that some parts are as old as the eleventh century: Peter Foote, 'Reflections on *Landabrigðsþattr* and *Rekapatr* in *Grágás*', in *Tradition og historieskrivning. Kilderne til Nordens ældste historie*, ed. by Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Aarhus, 1987), pp. 53–64. Earliest extant manuscripts of the Norwegian laws of the Borgarþing and Frostathing are dating from c. 1300 and before 1350 respectively: Alexandra Sanmark, *Power and Conversion. A Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia*, Occasional Papers in Archaeology, 34 (2004), pp. 134–35. Swedish law of the provinces of Hälsingland, Uppland and Västmanland are all preserved in manuscripts dating from the thirteenth century, the law of Uppland from the early half of the century: *Svenska landskapslagar. Tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar. Tredje serien: Södermannalagen och Hälsingelagen*, ed. by Åke Holmbäck and Elias Wessén (Stockholm, 1979), p. XLIII; *Svenska landskapslagar. Tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar. Första serien: Östgötalagen och Upplandslagen*, ed. by Åke Holmbäck and Elias Wessén (Stockholm, 1979), pp. 3–6; *Svenska landskapslagar. Tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar. Andra serien: Dalalagen och Västmanlagen*, ed. by Åke Holmbäck and Elias Wessén (Stockholm, 1979), pp. XXXII–XXXV. Scholars have argued that there is reason to believe that some sections, particularly considering the law of Hälsingland, being considerably older: Stefan Brink, 'Law and Legal Custom in Viking Age Scandinavia', in *The Scandinavians from the Vendel Period to the Tenth Century: an Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. by Judith Jesch (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 117–27. Medieval Scandinavian provincial laws have, after the intense critical debate

be abandoned, an accepted pre-Christian tradition, it had to be taken away without being given its first meal from the mother's breast.²³ The provincial law of the Borgarþing describes the helping women's task at the delivery as watching over the newborn child until it had taken its mother's breast in order to prevent it being killed by the mother. After the feeding the child had the right to be raised, and did not need to be protected.²⁴ In this case, the early Christian law reveals a culture clash between the old tradition permitting infanticide if performed before the breast-giving and the Christian law forbidding such exposure.

Yet another functional meaning of the ritual is to be found in other medieval laws. Provincial laws from Sweden reveal legal adaptations which appear to form a compromise with older traditions. The law codes of the provinces of Hälsingland, Uppland and Västmanland stated the child not only needed to be baptised, but also had to have taken milk from the mother's breast to be included in succession of inheritance. The regulation calls upon cases where the child eventually died and someone claimed its inheritance.²⁵ This might be interpreted as a combination of the traditional rite of passage, and the Christian ritual of baptism, which gradually superseded the numerous pre-Christian

in the 1980s, recently been re-established as sources to medieval mentality, ideology and customary law: cf. Peter Foote, 'Reflections on *Landabrigðsþattr* and *Rekapaþtr*, in *Grágás*', pp. 53–64. Per Norseng, 'Law Codes as a Source for Nordic History in the Early Middle Ages', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 16 (1991), 137–66. Stefan Brink, 'Law and Legal Custom in Viking Age Scandinavia', pp. 117–27. Sanmark, *Power of Conversion. A Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia*. Practices described in law texts that are unconformable with Christian ideology are here not approached simply as relics of pre-Christian culture, but as active medieval practices with a history of tradition. The Saami and Finnish cultures are not included since they are generally different from what is called the northern Viking-Age or medieval culture, including Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland, as discussed in this volume.

²³ Most clearly expressed in the old law of the Borgarþing, chapter 1, *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. by R. Keyser and P.A. Munch et al., 5 vols. (Christiania, 1846–95), 1, p. 339.

²⁴ The law of the Borgarþing, chapter 3, *Norges gamle love indtil 1387*, 1, p. 340. Compare also Else Mundal, 'Barneutbering', in *Kvinnors rosegård. Medeltidskvinnors liv och hälsa, lust och barnafödande. Föredrag från nordiska tvärvetenskapliga symposiet i Århus aug. 1985 och Visby sept. 1987*, ed. by Hedda Gunneng et al., Skriftserie från centrum för kvinnoforskning vid Stockholms universitet, 1 (Stockholm, 1989), pp. 122–34 (p. 131).

²⁵ *Svenska landskapslagar. Tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar. Tredje serien: Södermanalagen och Hälsingelagen*, ed. by Åke Holmbäck and Elias, pp. 308 and 319–20. *Svenska landskapslagar. Tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar. Första serien: Östgötalagen och Upplandslagen*, ed. by Åke Holmbäck and Elias Wessén, p. 70. *Svenska landskapslagar. Tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar. Andra serien: Dalalagen och Västmannalagen*, ed. by Åke Holmbäck and Elias Wessén, pp. 51 and 62.

rites of passage in the introductory phase of a child's life. Icelandic law also includes the newborn child in succession of inheritance only if the marriage between its parents had been properly conducted, the child born alive and if it had taken food.²⁶

The first feeding as described in Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish medieval law points towards a ritualized incorporative function of the act, and that it was an accepted and widespread practice within the area. The acknowledgement of the practice as a strategy to prevent child abandonment accentuates the actuality of the ritual, as does the aspect of introduction in succession of inheritance. Since baptism as the introductory ritual concerning the child's right to inheritance was introduced and proposed by the medieval Scandinavian church organisation, the alternate ritual is likely to be of older origin.²⁷

Given the importance of the ritual of the first feeding, and the principle of symbolic meaning implicated by the burial meal, the Fjälkinge feeding vessels might be interpreted as a signal to the afterlife that this particular child was to be considered an integrated member of the household and family line. The feeding vessel symbolizing the initiated child's status is also expressed in the law of the Frostaping. In the case of a child being born without providers, the child was to be baptised and the responsibility of bringing it up was shared amongst the farmers in the neighbourhood, one month at the time. At the turnover, the farmer leaving the child was to bring it to the receiving farm and lay it on the ground; they were also to bring the cup from which the baby was fed. If the farmer followed this procedure and there were witnesses to the effect, the responsibility for the child's well-being was transmitted to the receiving farmer.²⁸ The cup is used as a symbol of transition for the child being accepted into society. The burial, too, could be seen in this sense as being an equally transitional context. This idea might be supported by the distribution of vessels in relation to age of the buried children in Fjälkinge, since nearly half the children who died younger than two years of age were buried with a vessel. From the age of two and among the adults, vessels are not found in the grave context,

²⁶ *Grágás. Konungsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1852–70), 2 vols, 1a, pp. 222 and 224.

²⁷ Lizzie Carlsson, "Jag giver dig min dotter." *Troloving och äktenskap i den svenska kvinnans äldre historia*. Skrifter utgivna av Institutet för rättshistorisk forskning grundat av Gustav och Carin Olin 29, 2 vols (Stockholm, 1972), 2, pp. 219–34.

²⁸ The law of the Frostaping, chapter 2:2, *Norges gamle love*, 1, p. 131. See also King Sverres *kristinrettr*, chapter 26, *Norges gamle love*, 1, p. 418.

indicating that the vessels are to be seen as materialised definitions of the incorporated status of these new members of society, alluding to the ritual of the first feeding.

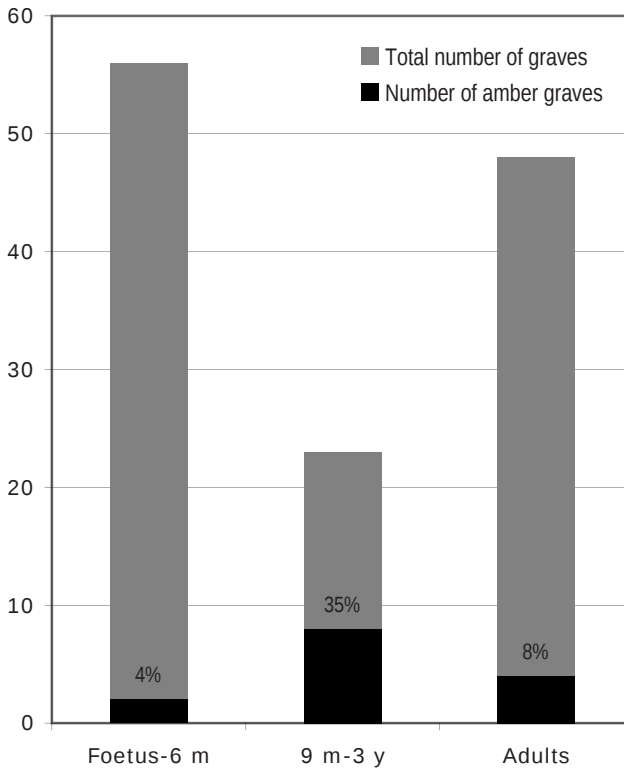
Young and Disabled and the Meaning of Amber Amulets

Yet another artefact type needs to be addressed when approaching representations of early childhood in Fjälkinge. Fourteen individuals had been given amber artefacts in the grave, generally in the form of a bead carried on a string around the neck, with the exception of the grave of a three-year-old child (grave 351) which contained three amber beads, and an amber amulet in the form of a Thor's hammer pendant was buried in the grave of a one and a half year old (grave 991). These amber artefacts are viewed as having amuletic properties as carriers of specific powers and meaning.²⁹

Table 2 displays a distinction between age groups in respect of the distribution of amber. At Fjälkinge, more than a third of the total group of children between six months and three years of age were given amber, while amongst the youngest infants it was only occasionally found. Of the adults, three females and one male were buried with amber. The male adult was interred in one of the most spectacular burials of the site. He was aged between thirty-five and sixty when he died and he had been interred with a spindle whorl and a full necklace containing one amber bead, both artefact types traditionally considered female equipment. He was placed doubled in the northern half of a coffin, face down, with a wild boar's tusk placed on his forehead. This

²⁹ Classifying amber as a material of symbolic significance in grave contexts in Scandinavia and in Europe has been convincingly carried out from different perspectives, periods and sources: see, for instance, Audrey L. Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, 96 (Oxford, 1981), pp. 67–70; Berta Stjernquist, *Archaeological and Scientific Studies of Amber from the Swedish Iron Age*, Studier utgivna av Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet i Lund 1994–1995:1 (Lund, 1994), pp. 38–39; Christopher Tilley, *An Ethnography of the Neolithic. Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia*, New Studies in Archaeology (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 315–17; Janis Runcis, *Bärnstensbarnen: bilder, berättelser och betraktelser*, Riksantikvarieämbetet, arkeologiska undersökningar skrifter, 41 (Stockholm, 2002). Amber in Scandinavian Viking-Age contexts has been found to function as protective material, for instance as components in amulet pouches, in Thor's hammers and sword beads interpreted as protection items for the sword and its carrier: see for instance Mårten Stenberger, *Det forntida Sverige* (Stockholm, 1979) pp. 524–25, *Archaeological and Scientific Studies of Amber from the Swedish Iron Age*, pp. 26–39, with references.

Table 2. Appearance of amber according to age in the cemetery of Fjälkinge.



example of unclear gender expression and interment in the prone position, signifying a burial of dishonour, is an anomalous case of mortuary practice within the cemetery. The three adult females buried with amber are estimated to be among the oldest individuals in the buried population (40–60, >60 and >80 respectively).³⁰ The skeletal remains of all four of these adults buried with amber display traces of disease or trauma: the male and two of the females showed signs of *Cribra Orbitalae*, a nutritive disturbance during childhood or youth, probably

³⁰ Caroline Arcini, 'Appendix 6: Osteologisk rapport av skelettgravarna i Fjälkinge', in Helgesson, *Rapport, arkeologisk undersökning 1990 Fjälkinge 35:60 m.fl.* All information on estimated age and skeletal pathology are from this report.

as a consequence of a long-term disease and/or anaemia,³¹ another female suffered from severe arthritis, and the female aged over eighty was suffering from age-related osteoporosis and multiple fractures.³² Her multiple fractures might indicate immobility, and it is most likely that she was dependent on others for her daily care at the end of her life. When buried she was placed crouched in an extremely narrow coffin (0.80×0.42 m.), and equipped with nothing but an amber bead carried on a string around her neck. Even when taken into consideration that not all physical pathology or injuries are traceable through the osseous record, the correlation between such traces of infirmity and amber in graves is striking. Amongst the fourteen individuals with amber beads or amulets, traces of disease or trauma were noted in nine cases (64%). Traces of illness or trauma amongst individuals without amber were found in only 26% of the cases.³³ The connection between amber and disease is accentuated by grave 351, where a three-year-old child was found. This interment was the only one with more than one amber item, three beads, and the osseous remains displayed signs of such physical distress that an advanced state of *Cribra Orbitalae* could be noted.³⁴ Although it must be said that not all individuals with skeletal traces of disease were equipped with amber, and that it is quite possible that another distinction motivated the use of amber amulets, the young and old individuals with amber in their graves are all characterised by illness and/or physical infirmity.

Several contributors to this volume have discussed the social aspect of 'old age', as being closely related to functional ability.³⁵ Comparing the amber-bearing individuals with the rest of the interred, I would propose a similar interpretation. The young children and the adults buried with amber were clearly considered to be in certain need of

³¹ Arcini, *Appendix*, pp. 18–19. *Cribra Orbitalae*, skeletal signs of nutritive disorder most often caused by drawn out and serious state of illness, is most likely to have developed during childhood, since adult skeletons are less affected by nutritive disorder: Patricia Stuart-Macadam, 'Porotic hyperostosis: Representative of Childhood Condition', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 66/4 (1985), 391–98 (p. 392).

³² Arcini, *Appendix*, p. 16.

³³ Out of 113 individuals examined, 29 showed traces of illness or trauma, including healed fractures: Arcini, *Appendix*, pp. 23–26.

³⁴ Anna Kloo et al. *Barnen berättar: en studie av barngravar från ett vikingatida gravfält i Fjälkinge*, unpublished paper for a candidate grade in Historical Osteology, University of Lund, (Lund, 1999) p. 126.

³⁵ See Shannon Lewis-Simpson, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, and Ármann Jakobson, this volume.

protection, perhaps according to age and/or disability. Even if the adults had not necessarily reached a chronological 'old age', they might have been dysfunctional from a physical, or in one case social, aspect. In the case of the oldest woman it is clearly so, and she was even buried in a coffin proportioned for a small child, being only 80 cm in length. The corresponding expressions seen in these graves suggest that disabled or dysfunctional adults belonged to a social sphere closely related to children under the age of three, these being the unproductive dependants of household and society.³⁶

Infant Graves

If amber was meant to protect the vulnerable in death, why where only two of all those fifty-seven infants under the age of six months at death provided with this form of protection?

The ratio of infants and children to adults in Fjälkinge is aberrant in respect of Viking-Age burial contexts. The question whether the normative under-representation of children found in Late Iron-Age cemeteries should be seen as representative of the living population, or as a consequence of poor conditions of preservation and physical factors has been raised by several scholars, and answered firmly in the negative.³⁷ The osteologist Helena Hedelin has demonstrated that the varying numbers of child graves are linked to different periods, and should therefore be understood in terms of differences in burial practice and/or social structure.³⁸ Aside from a sacral dimension, mortuary practice in the Scandinavian pre-Christian Viking-Age expressed profane and judicial elements such as social and economical status, family power, and land ownership.³⁹ The expression of pre-Christian burial

³⁶ Compare Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, this volume.

³⁷ Berit J. Sellevold et al., *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, pp. 210–11; Berit J. Sellevold 'Comments on Population Studies and the Archaeologist', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 22/2 (1989), 77–87 (pp. 80–81). Helena Hedelin, 'Barngravar—speglingar av en verklighet?', in *Bronsålder och äldre järnålder i Stockholms län. Två seminarier vid Stockholms läns museum*, ed. by Peter Bratt and Åsa Lundström (Stockholm, 1997), pp. 79–85. Stig Welinder, 'The Cultural Construction of Childhood in Scandinavia 3500 BC–1350 AD', *Current Swedish Archaeology*, 6 (1998), pp. 185–204.

³⁸ Helena Hedelin, 'Barngravar—speglingar av en verklighet?', pp. 79–85.

³⁹ See for instance Torun Zachrisson, 'The Odal and its Manifestation in the Landscape', *Current Swedish Archaeology*, 2 (1994), 219–38; Dagfinn Skre, *Herredømmet. Bosetning og besittelse på Romeriket 200–1350 e.Kr* (Oslo, 1998), pp. 290–97; Gunnar Andersson,

Table 3. Relation between grave orientation and age groups. Graves orientated between the cardinal points are presented separately (NE/SW). Foetuses/newborns are predominant in east/west-oriented graves.

Age	Total (n)	Id. orient.	NE/SW	N/S	E/W
Foetus/Newb.	18	18	1	4	13
0–3 m.	21	20	0	7	13
3 m.–3 y.	39	37	1	30	6
Adults	49	49	1	30	18

might therefore to some degree be linked, perhaps even conditionally, to the individual's ability to produce and reproduce his/her social status, which also corresponds to the discussion on household dependants. In Viking-Age cemeteries which lack any noticeable Christian influence, those who are not yet incorporated within society and any social dependants could actually be missing in the communal cemetery as a consequence of burial concepts and motives. It should be noted that the medieval Scandinavian Church decreed that all Christians be buried in the church cemetery, placing a special emphasis on baptized infants.⁴⁰ This might account for the fact that, in direct contrast to pre-Christian cemeteries; about half of the buried population in Scandinavian church cemeteries consists of children.⁴¹

The graves of newborns to children under three months of age, as shown in Table 3, are more inclined to be oriented east/west than graves of other age groups. This tendency is even more pronounced in the graves of foetuses and newborns. What clearly distinguishes the burials of the youngest infants from other age groups in Fjälkinge is not only the over-representation in east/west-oriented graves, but the high frequency of east/west-graves simultaneously exhibiting supine interments and no grave goods. The simultaneity of these elements is utterly characteristic for Christian church cemetery burials.

Gravspråk som religiös strategi. Valsta och Skälby i Attundaland under vikingatid och tidig medeltid (Stockholm, 2004), pp. 72–73, 122–39, 144.

⁴⁰ Bertil Nilsson, *De Sepulchris. Gravrätten i Corpus Iuris Canonici och i medeltida nordisk lagstiftning*, Kyrkovetenskapliga skrifter, 44 (Stockholm, 1989) pp. 232–37.

⁴¹ E.g. Ole Jørgen Benedictow, *The Medieval Demographic System of the Nordic Countries* (Oslo, 1993), pp. 29–36 with references. Iregren, 'Avbruten amning blev barnens död?—Ett försök till tolkning av Västerhusmaterialet', pp. 23–24. Jonsson, 'Bland barnaföderskor, spädbarn och vuxna barn—social och religiös kontroll speglad i gravmaterial från Västerhus', pp. 21–23.

Table 4. An outline of the features studied in the paper in relation to age groups. The only twelve-year-old individual has been included in the adult group. No individuals between three and twelve years of age were found in the cemetery. Feature figures characteristic of age have been marked.

	1. F/newb. (n = 18)	2. 0–6 m. (n = 37)	3. 9 m.–3 y. (n = 23)	4. Adults (n = 49)
E/W	67%	43%	19%	37%
Vessel	18%	43%	52%	0%
Amber	0%	5%	35%	8%

It can therefore be said that the arrangement of these graves reflects Christian burial ideology more consistently than do graves of other age groups. The higher rate of infants buried with a Christian orientation, an orientation which later becomes the norm, suggests that the actual presence of young children in a syncretic cemetery might be a consequence of Christian influence or regulations.

Concluding Remarks

The specific features studied in this paper revealed some age-related patterns, summarized in table 4.

The complex burial treatment within the cemetery of Fjälkinge cannot be simplified into identifying Christian and pre-Christian graves or individuals, and it is doubtful as to whether such divisions were made at the time. However, it is implicated in this study that the presence of the youngest infants (group 1) more so than other age groups was motivated by Christian motives and ideals. Alexandra Sanmark has argued that early Christian law in Scandinavia was more concerned with regulating people's everyday actions than actual religious belief.⁴² The regulations on infant burial, properly followed in medieval cemeteries, might have been formally expressed as early as AD c. 900–1050 at Fjälkinge. The influence of Christianity on death and the afterlife is represented at Fjälkinge by the unusual numbers of infant graves and the orientation of these graves.

While graves of the youngest infants are mainly restricted to expressions of Christian burial ideals, graves of the older children also express

⁴² Sanmark, *Power of Conversion*.

conceptions of the pre-Christian life cycle valid in this syncretic milieu. Amber is most commonly found in the graves of children from nine months to three years of age, suggesting that older children are considered, at least in some respect, full members of household and society. The ceramic vessels interpreted as representations for incorporation and belonging are likely to have functioned as such materialised symbols. The hand-over situation described in the law of the Frostaping might allude to the same sort of reality of care which one sees expressed in burial, both functioning in a clearly ambivalent traditional/early Christian milieu within the Scandinavian culture where food and drink were highly symbolized. Furthermore, the presence of amber amulets also appears to mark out older children, the very old, and disabled as needing protection in society.

It is, therefore, curious that the youngest infants are strongly under-represented in this burial context of amber and vessels, since one would assume that they, too, would have been included in this group. One could suggest that these youngest infants, although present in the cemetery due to the influence of Christian laws and customs, were not yet totally considered full members of a society that still adhered to pre-Christian social concepts and childhood initiation rituals. The cemetery record of Fjälkinge, situated as it is between two traditions, acknowledges the idea of the afterlife including every baptized individual, but does perhaps not acknowledge newborns as immediate and full social members. This exclusion should not be approached as a result of a lack of parental love or a generally low social status of the group of children, but as a materialised consequence of a different definition of the beginning of social life.

CHILD BURIALS AND CHILDREN'S STATUS IN MEDIEVAL NORWAY

Berit J. Sellevold

The island of Selja was an important religious centre in the early Christian era in Norway (fig. 1). 'The small island south of the unsheltered promontory *Stadlandet*—the westernmost point of the Norwegian coast—was a shrine, a pilgrimage centre, a bishop's seat and a monastery in the Middle Ages', begins Gro Steinsland's description of the cave sanctuary on Selja.¹ Western Norway's first episcopal see was established at Selja some time before c. 1070, but it was moved to Bergen probably before 1100. Early in the twelfth century, one of Norway's first monasteries was established close to the sanctuary by Benedictine monks from England (fig. 2), and the monastic church was dedicated to an English saint, St Alban.²

The saint who above all was associated with Selja, however, was Norway's only female saint, Sunniva.³ The pilgrimage objective on the island was a shallow cave, 50–60 m above sea level in a mountainside facing westwards towards the North Sea. According to the legend, St Sunniva died here in a rock avalanche.⁴ A large terrace was constructed on the pile of rocks outside the cave, and a small church was built on this terrace to house the shrine with St Sunniva's remains. In 1170, the shrine was moved to Bergen but the sanctuary continued to function as a pilgrimage site throughout the Middle Ages.

¹ Gro Steinsland, 'Hulchelligdommen på Selja: På leting etter førkristne spor—en vandring i myter, makter og tegn', in *Selja—heilag stad i 1000 år*, ed. by Magnus Rindal (Oslo, 1997), pp. 11–33 (my translation).

² Alf Tore Hommedal, 'Frå heller til pilgrimskyrkje: Heilagstaden på Selja', in *Fra hedendom til kristendom. Perspektiver på religionsskiftet i Norge*, ed. by Magnus Rindal (Oslo, 1997), pp. 112–24; Barbara E. Crawford, 'Holy Places in the British Isles: Some Parallels to Selja', in *Two Studies on the Middle Ages*, ed. by Magnus Rindal (Oslo, 1996), pp. 7–29.

³ Norway did not have many saints. In fact, there were only seven in all: Olav, Eystein, Hallvard, Torfinn of Hamar, Jarl Magnus of Orkney, Jarl Ragnvald of Orkney, and Sunniva.

⁴ See, for instance, Else Mundal, *Legender frå mellomalderen* (Oslo, 1995).



Figure 1. The Selja island on the west coast of Norway was the site of a medieval monastery. *Photo: Berit J. Sellevold.*



Figure 2. The ruins of the Benedictine monastery at Selja are among the best preserved remains of a medieval monastery in Norway. The church tower is almost intact. *Photo: Berit J. Sellevold.*

During the archaeological investigations in the monastic church ruins in 1990 and 1991, many graves were uncovered. They were dated stratigraphically to between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries AD. The excavations comprised a small area south of the midline of the nave, and a small area in the north-west corner of the nave. In all, the remains of 26 individuals were disinterred (fig. 3).⁵ More than half of the dead were children and youngsters: six were newborn, one child was about two months, one was *c.* six months, two children were around six years, and two were *c.* 14 years. Two other sub-adults were almost grown, *c.* 17–20 years. None of the skeletons of the children and youngsters could be securely sex determined. While age determination of child skeletons can be made rather accurately based on the development of bones and teeth, sex determinations can only be tentative at best. Sex determinations are largely based on skeletal traits that appear during puberty, the so-called secondary sex characteristics. Prior to the manifestation of these traits, sex determination of juvenile skeletal remains is very difficult.⁶ There were no pathological changes in the juvenile bones and the skeletal remains did not reveal any information about the causes of death.⁷

Finding the remains of so many small children inside a monastic church—newborns, infants, toddlers, and bigger children—naturally aroused curiosity. Who were these children? Why were they buried in a Benedictine monastery? Why were they buried in such a prominent and prestigious place inside the monastic church itself? In order to find answers to questions such as these, both written and archaeological sources have been considered.

Children in Medieval Norway

As is the case elsewhere in the north, descriptions of children are not exactly main points of interest in Norwegian medieval written sources. The few references to children in the sources indicate that children *per se* had a low status, having a 'utilitarian' function, either as a labour force

⁵ Berit J. Sellevold, "‘Rik mann, fattig mann, tigger, tyv—’", in Rindal, *Fra hedendom til kristendom*, pp. 63–77; 'Begravelsene i klosterkirken på Selja: Antropologiske undersøkelser av menneskeben funnet i ruinen av St. Albanuskirken på Selja', in Rindal, *Selja—heilag stad i 1000 år*, pp. 200–39.

⁶ Louise Scheuer and Sue Black, *Developmental Juvenile Osteology* (San Diego, 2000).

⁷ Sellevold, 'Begravelsene i klosterkirken på Selja'.

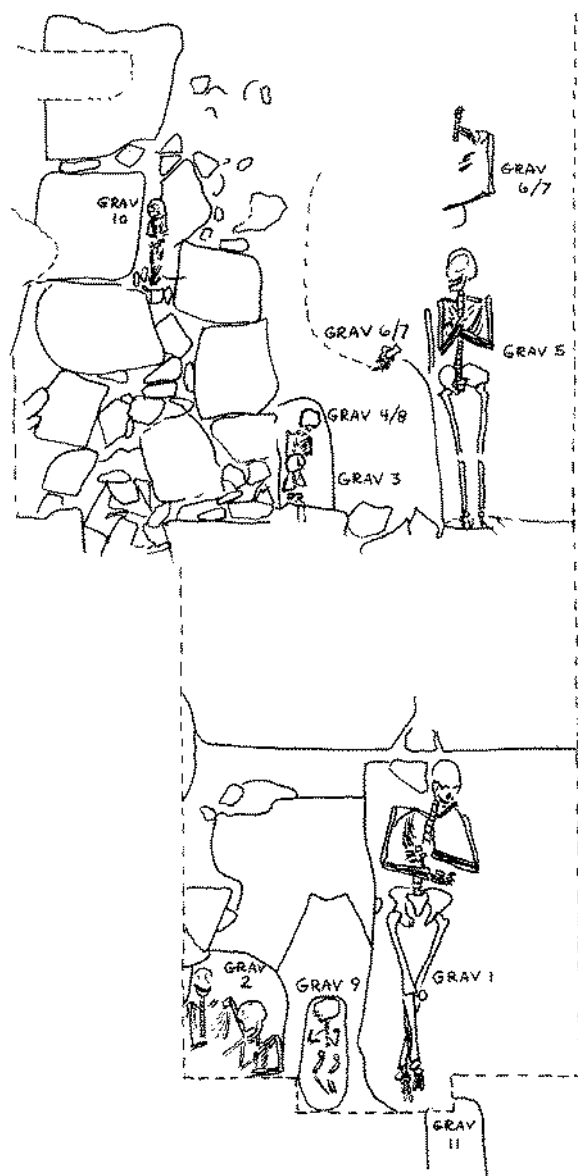


Figure 3. The remains of 26 individuals were uncovered in the nave of the Selja monastic church. *Drawing: Alf Tore Hommedal.*

or as a means of creating political alliances.⁸ One famous Norwegian example of the latter is that of King Håkon the Good, the youngest son of King Haraldr hárfagri. According to his saga, Håkon was sent to the court of the Christian King Athelstan (*Aðelsteinn*) in England at an early age to be fostered by him.⁹ Håkon remained at the English court until Haraldr hárfagri's death. When Håkon subsequently returned to Norway, he was accepted as king in the coastal regions between Møre and Agder,¹⁰ and became known as *Aðelsteinsfostre* ('foster child of Athelstan').

Scholars disagree about the role and social status of children in the Middle Ages. It has been suggested that parents did not invest emotionally in their children because of the high risk of losing them early due to high childhood mortality. However, both saga texts and legal documents provide clear evidence that children were loved, cared for, and deeply mourned by their parents when they died.¹¹ Archaeological investigations of burial customs and osteoarchaeological investigations of skeletal remains complement the information in written sources, and suggest that if indeed childhood *per se* may have been of small importance in medieval Norwegian society, this does not mean that the child itself was unimportant. The finding of numerous child graves in the monastic church at Selja would seem to point to a high status for at least some children. In order to seek answers to our questions about the child burials in the nave of the Selja monastic church, we have to consider the medieval idea of death, and the importance of baptism to medieval Norwegian burial customs.

The Idea of Death and the Importance of Baptism in the Middle Ages

Eternity was a key word in the conception of death in the Middle Ages. Death was a process which did not end with physical death. The moment of death marked the transition to a temporary state in which the dead awaited the coming of Christ and hopefully, salvation

⁸ Sverre Bagge, *Mennesket i middelalderens Norge. Tanker, tro og holdninger 1000–1300* (Oslo, 1998).

⁹ Snorri Sturlason, *Håkon den godes saga*, in *Snorres kongesagaer*, ed. by Anne Holtsmark and Didrik Arup Seip (Oslo, 1934); Gro Steinsland, *Norron religion. Myter, riter og samfunn* (Oslo, 2005).

¹⁰ Crawford, 'Holy Places in the British Isles'.

¹¹ Bagge, *Mennesket i middelalderens Norge*.

in paradise. In the Middle Ages, people had a close relationship with death. Life on earth was only a short stage in the human experience, a test which would determine one's eternal existence of either salvation or damnation. The concept of the hereafter was quite concrete: the dead either went to *limbo*, or to *hell*, or through *purgatory* to *paradise*. Limbo was a region on the edge of hell, the eternal resting place for the souls of the righteous who died before the coming of Christ, and for the souls of infants who died before being baptised. In limbo there was no punishment or pain, but those who went to limbo could not enjoy the bliss of salvation to be had in paradise.

For the salvation of the soul, the deceased must be laid to rest in consecrated ground.¹² The consecrated churchyard was reserved for those who were baptised into the Christian community, and baptism was therefore of the utmost importance. Burial of heathens and unbaptised persons in the churchyard was prohibited. This included newborn infants who died before they were baptised. Thus, when we find remains of newborns in churches and churchyards we know that the child was alive at birth for a period of time long enough to permit baptism.

The idea that an innocent child should reside in limbo for all eternity was abhorrent to parents in the Middle Ages. The development of comprehensive rules concerning emergency baptism and the great efforts that were spent in order to baptise are testament to this repugnance. Rules for emergency baptism are given in the ecclesiastical sections of the early medieval Norwegian provincial laws: normally a priest should baptise the child, but lay people—preferably men—could perform the baptismal rites in emergencies. In the utmost emergencies, when no male was present, even the mother herself could baptise her dying child.¹³ In Switzerland, a churchyard in the Marienwallfahrtszentrum at Oberbüren had special areas reserved for stillborn, unbaptised children with a view to helping them out of limbo.¹⁴ Examples are numerous

¹² Berit J. Sellevold, 'Død og grav: Om synet på døden i middelalderen i lys av det arkeologiske materialet fra Hamar domkirkeruin', in *Hamar bispestol 850 år*, ed. by Conrad Krohn and others (Hamar, 2004), pp. 71–95.

¹³ Magnus Rindal, 'Liv og død i kyrkjens lover: Dei eldste norske kristenrettene', in Rindal, *Fra hedendom til kristendom*, pp. 141–49.

¹⁴ Susi Ulrich-Bochsler, 'Jenseitsvorstellungen im Mittelalter: die Wiederbelebung von totgeborenen Kindern. Archäologische und anthropologische Untersuchungen im Marienwallfahrtszentrum von Oberbüren im Kanton Bern/Schweiz', in *Death and Burial in Medieval Europe. Papers of the "Medieval Europe Brugge 1997" Conference*, ed. by Guy De Boe and Frans Verhaeghe (Zellik, 1997), II, pp. 7–14.

in the archaeological record of efforts to help children achieve eternal salvation by being buried in consecrated ground. Poignant examples are found in the medieval Hamar Cathedral cemetery in eastern Norway: three graves in the churchyard contained the skeletal remains of four prematurely born children.¹⁵ One of the three graves contained two prematurely born babies buried side by side. Both had died in the fifth foetal month. In the two other graves there were remains of one prematurely born child in each grave, both having died in the sixth foetal month. Since these children had been buried in the churchyard, we must assume that they were not stillborn, but had lived long enough to be baptised. Whether or not the mothers survived the childbirth is not possible to determine from the find contexts of the child skeletons, but they probably did. Otherwise one might assume that mother and child would have been buried together.

Yet with regards to the treatment of dead pregnant women and the treatment of the foetus in the womb, baptism as an absolute requirement for burial in consecrated ground created problems for the Church. A pregnant woman was considered unclean, and a potential risk to other people. In life she had to undergo cleansing rites before being readmitted to church services having given birth. Whether or not to bury a dead pregnant woman in consecrated ground was a problematic question, and the issue was the subject of many early Christian scholastic debates.¹⁶ Was the foetus a human being in its own right, or was the foetus a part of the woman's body? The woman was baptised and should be buried in the churchyard, but the unborn child was not baptised. The child was a heathen, and by definition it should not be buried in consecrated ground.

The idea that a childbearing woman was unclean is a very ancient belief, going back at least to early Judaism. *Canones Nidrosiensis* 9 §2, which dates to the period between AD 1152 and 1188, states that women who die in childbirth do have the right to be buried in the churchyard. The author of the *Canones* was most probably Archbishop Øystein Erlendsson. Archbishop Øystein told his priests that they should not prevent pregnant women from being buried in the churchyard, nor

¹⁵ Berit J. Sellevold, *From Death to Life in Medieval Hamar. Skeletons and Graves as Historical Source Material* (Oslo, 2001).

¹⁶ Bertil Nilsson, *De Sepulturis. Gravrätten i Corpus Iuris Canonici och i medeltida nordisk lagstiftning* (Stockholm, 1989); *Kvinnor, män och barn på medeltida begravningsplatser* (Uppsala, 1994); Sellevold, "‘Rik mann, fattig mann, tigger, tyv—’".

should they order the foetus to be cut out of the woman's body.¹⁷ Only one of the medieval Norwegian provincial laws, the Frostaping Law for the diocese of Nidaros, states that dead pregnant women should be buried 'like other people' and that the foetus should not be removed from the woman's body. The other provincial laws are silent on this issue. Archaeological investigations of churchyards not only within the jurisdiction of the Frostaping Law but also within the other jurisdictions have provided many examples of burials of dead pregnant women with the foetus in situ. As it is not possible to determine whether or not a foetus had been removed from the body of a dead woman based on skeletal evidence, how the problem was actually solved in each case is unknown.

Burial Customs

A grave is a closed event. Grave monuments testify to people's ideas of death, and to the feelings and thoughts about the dead person. Archaeological investigations of the grave and its construction, and interdisciplinary research into the find context, grave goods, and remains of the dead give information both about the event itself, about the dead person, and about the people and the social group who buried their dead.

Unwritten Rules

A burial in the Middle Ages was regulated both by unwritten principles and written rules and regulations. Ideally, the burial customs were uniform for all: all baptised individuals were to be treated equally at death. According to unwritten principles the individual Christian grave should be aligned west-east with the head of the deceased in the west end of the grave and the body deposited supine, *i.e.*, stretched out on the back. Supposedly this would enable the dead to sit up in their graves on the Day of Judgement and immediately see Christ appearing in the east. Although there was no official opposition to such, another unwritten principle was that there were to be no grave gifts or objects

¹⁷ This issue has been thoroughly discussed by Else Mundal: 'Korleis påverka kristninga og kyrkja kjønnsrollemønstra?', *Religion och bibel. Nathan Söderblom-sällskapetets årsbok 1996* (1996), pp. 95–103.

in the grave. These principles seem to have applied to Christian graves from the beginning.¹⁸

There were also unwritten rules with regard to the organisation of the churchyard. For the living, the way to salvation was through faith and participation in divine service and the sacraments. For the dead, the stay in purgatory with all its sufferings could be shortened through masses and intercessory prayers. For these reasons, a grave located as close as possible to the place where divine services were being held was very desirable. The most desirable burial place of all was the area close to the high altar, and other places inside the church were also very attractive. The medieval church may be described as a series of concentric circles around the most sacred place, the high altar. The sacredness diminished towards the west and towards the churchyard fence. Out in the churchyard some areas were more attractive than others. The sacredness of the consecrated building made the areas closest to the church most desirable for burial, especially under the eaves where the rain water falling off the roof, considered as like holy water since it had touched the consecrated building, would anoint the graves. The area east of the choir was an especially attractive burial place, being so close to the high altar. The area south of the church was also highly prized, being associated with the almost archetypal idea of south as positive and good, and north as negative and bad or evil. This idea seems to have been concurrent in the Christian world view as in the pagan world view.¹⁹

A grave south of the church building was therefore considered more desirable than a grave north of the church. According to Bertil Nilsson, this dichotomy seems to have applied throughout Christendom.²⁰

Written Rules

Canon law first became operative in Norway when the archiepiscopal see at Nidaros was established in 1152/53. With regard to burial, canon law seems to have dealt with general issues such as which churches had burial rights, the freedom of choice of burial plot, the principle of

¹⁸ Berit J. Sellevold, 'Fra hedensk gravfelt til kirkegård—spørsmål om kontinuitet,' in *Drikk—og du vil leve skont. Festskrift til Ulla Lund Hansen på 60-årsdagen 18. august 2002*, ed. by J. Pind and others, *Studies in Archaeology and History*, 7 (Copenhagen, 2002), pp. 275–84.

¹⁹ See, for example, Steinsland, *Norron religion*.

²⁰ Nilsson, *Kvinnor, män och barn*.

keeping families together in the churchyard, the asylum rights of churchyards, and the question of who could be buried inside the churches. Canon law had no specific regulations dealing with child burials.

In the earliest surviving medieval Norwegian provincial laws, the sections dealing with ecclesiastical affairs—*Kristenrettbolkene*—contain rules about burials which also include children.²¹ In this section in the earliest version of the Eidsivathing Law (which pertained in the eastern part of Norway), there are specific regulations for the organisation of burials in the churchyard according to social status:

- The barons (*lendmenn*) and their wives and children should lie closest to the church;
- the landowners (*haudd*) and their wives and children next;
- the freed slaves (*loysinger*) and their wives and children next;
- slaves who were not yet free and their children next.
- Male and female slaves should be buried farthest away from the church, close to the churchyard fence; and
- men (*karfolk*) should be buried south of the church and women (*konor*) north of the church.

The law also lists all who should *not* be buried in the churchyard but who should be laid to rest outside the churchyard fence in unconsecrated ground. This category comprised criminals as well as unbaptised individuals, including unbaptised children.

Results and Discussions

The written sources give a rather complex picture of the status of children in medieval society. On the one hand, children seem to have had a low social status but a utilitarian value as a labour force and as a ‘commodity’ in building and strengthening social relations and political alliances. On the other hand, according to the burial regulations in the provincial laws, children had the same social status as their parents. It should also be pointed out that a child’s status in the family was decided by the father: the child of a slave woman and a man of

²¹ See, for example, Knut Robberstad, *Gamalnorske lovstykker* (Oslo, 1964).

high social status could be granted freedom and be brought up as the man's rightful child.²²

The archaeological material also presents a complex picture. Provided that the find contexts of child graves are carefully documented and interpreted, the archaeological records will reveal 'the truth' about the status of children. However, deducing the social status of individuals based on the evidence of graves in medieval cemeteries is not easy. While graves from the Iron Age in many cases testify to the social status of the deceased through the construction of the grave itself and/or through the objects in the grave, medieval Christian grave constructions are by and large quite homogeneous in structure and in general do not contain any grave goods. There is a world of difference in the power of expression of social status of e.g. the Viking Oseberg ship grave and a grave in a medieval churchyard. The former exhibits an almost incredible wealth in the objects which accompanied the dead, first and foremost of which, of course, is the vessel itself, but also in the tremendous efforts that went into the construction of the enormous mound. The woman for whom the Oseberg mound was constructed must indeed have been a very important member of society.²³

A medieval Christian grave, on the other hand, only seldom gives clear evidence of the social status of the individual in life. To the modern observer, a medieval Christian grave is almost anonymous in appearance, comprising often as not only the body of the deceased, and frequently not even traces of a coffin. However, the grave probably contained features which carried inherent messages to the contemporary society about the social status of the deceased even if many of these elements are not immediately evident to us. Among the features of the graves which *are* evident even today is the *location* of the grave, as outlined above.²⁴ A grave location was not fortuitous. It was one of the accepted ways of expressing social status. The construction of the grave would also have indicated status. Some of these elements have disintegrated and disappeared. A few privileged individuals were buried in graves made of stone slabs or bricks, but in other grave constructions,

²² Bagge, *Mennesket i middelalderens Norge*, p. 20.

²³ Arne Emil Christensen, Anne Stine Ingstad and Bjørn Myhre, *Osebergdronningens grav* (Oslo, 1992).

²⁴ Berit J. Sellevold, 'Children's Skeletons and Graves in Scandinavian Archaeology', in De Boe and Verhaeghe, *Death and Burial in Medieval Europe*, pp. 15–25; *From Death to Life in Medieval Hamar*; 'Død og grav'.

status-indicating features such as the wood of coffins or the textiles of clothes or shrouds have disintegrated and disappeared. In a few cases there may also have been objects in the graves despite the general principle of not depositing any objects. Sometimes preserved objects may indicate the status of the deceased. Bishops may have been buried in liturgical garments with a bishop's ring, a crozier, or a chalice and a paten; kings and members of the aristocracy may have been buried with, for example, a sword. In the graves of common people there may be found personal belongings such as a ring, a seal, rosary beads, coins, etc., which could indicate the social status of the buried individual. In other words, depending on the documentation of the archaeological find context and the state of preservation of the grave and its contents, it is sometimes possible to analyse medieval graves and skeletal remains and make deductions about the social status of the individuals, even in medieval churchyards.

The Child Graves at Selja

Finding child graves in prestigious locations is unusual but not without precedent: archaeological investigations elsewhere have uncovered children's graves in prestigious areas. In the churchyard of St Olav's church in Trondheim, which functioned as a church for the Franciscans for a period in the Middle Ages, there was a concentration of child graves in the attractive area close to the wall of the choir.²⁵ In the churchyard around the medieval cathedral ruins at Hamar in eastern Norway there were child graves east and south of the choir, and there was a concentration of child graves in the very attractive area south of the nave.²⁶ The child graves at Selja, however, were located in an area which was generally reserved for members of the upper strata of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and for lay persons of exceptionally high social standing. This location makes the Selja child graves rather special.

While canon law had no regulations dealing specifically with child burials, it did state that families should be kept together in the churchyard. The ecclesiastical sections of the Norwegian provincial laws also

²⁵ Berit J. Sellevold, 'Skjelettene i biblioteket: "Olavskirken", Folkebiblioteket, Trondheim. Rapport om den antropologiske undersøkelsen av skjelettfunnene fra 1989', *Arkeologiske undersøkelser i Trondheim*, 4 (1990), pp. 1–77.

²⁶ Sellevold, *From Death to Life in Medieval Hamar*; 'Død og grav'.

stated that children should be buried with their families. The archaeological evidence, however, shows that the principle of keeping families together in the churchyard was not always followed: archaeological investigations in many Scandinavian medieval churchyards have frequently uncovered concentrations of child graves in distinct and often prestigious parts of the cemetery. The choice of a grave location for a child in a special area together with other children may be interpreted as a sign that family unity was not an overriding principle. Perhaps other interests were at the forefront.

The dead child could be helped to salvation by being buried as close as possible to a sacred place and to the sacred deeds. The location of the graves in the Selja monastery may be taken as an expression of deep care and concern for the children in the hereafter. The prestigious burial plots for the children may also have expressed the status of the children's families. Both monasteries and churches could supplement their income by selling burial plots and masses when the financial situation was difficult. This opportunity was used: in the upper social classes it was customary to give large donations to churches and monasteries in exchange for burial plots and masses for the dead. The archaeological investigations of the stratigraphical layers in the nave of the monastic church at Selja showed that the many infant graves located there were constructed late in the functioning period of the monastery. In the older stratigraphical layers there were remains of adult males only, probably members of the monastic community. The child graves were probably constructed during a period when the financial situation of the monastery was difficult. The monks could have gradually sold grave plots inside the church to lay persons to augment the income of the monastery. The purchase of such attractive plots was not within the means of people from the lower social classes. Only the very rich could afford to buy such burial plots. Burying a child in such a location would be a demonstration of the wealth and the importance of the child's family. The children in the Selja monastic church must therefore have belonged to wealthy and powerful families.

There may have been several reasons for choosing a monastery, and especially Selja, as a burial place for children. The island of Selja with the shrine of St Sunniva was a pilgrimage objective in itself but was also a resting place for pilgrims on their way to the most important shrine in Norway, St Olav's shrine at Nidaros. The child burials might be viewed with this fact in mind. Sick and weak children may have been brought to the monastery hospital at Selja in the hope that they

would regain their health with the aid of the saint and the monks. If they died, then at least they could be buried within the monastery.

The function of the monastery as an 'educational institution' should also be considered. In the 1860s, child skeletons were found in the ruins of Selja. Among these, there were remains of several children of 'school age'. The author Sigrid Undset pointed out that according to the rules of their order the Benedictines were obliged to keep school for boys. She suggested that the child burials might be connected with the many epidemics of 'child deaths' sweeping through Norway in the Middle Ages.²⁷ This hypothesis might hold true, but it does not explain the presence of newborns and infants.

The most likely explanation for the presence of the child graves in the nave of the monastic church seems to be that the children belonged to wealthy families with special relations to the Selja monastery. The landed property of the monastery was for a period quite considerable. Most of this property was in the region of Nordfjord in western Norway and had been donated to the monastery by powerful families such as the Stårheim and the Naustdal families. It is quite likely that these families would bury their dead, including their children, in the monastery at Selja. The locations of the child graves in the nave of the monastic church may be expressions of the social status of their families but may also be expressions of concern for the dead children's souls. One of the main functions of monasteries was to celebrate mass, and those who were buried inside a monastic church were guaranteed close proximity to regular celebrations of the mass and the sacraments. This would help the child's soul in the hereafter.

The child graves in the monastic church at Selja show that children in medieval Norway were highly valued and were accorded the same expressions of social status in death as adults. Children may have been regarded as possessions of an elite family and therefore buried in a way befitting the family's status. But even if the written historical sources do not specifically mention parental love, care and concern, the child graves inside the church also demonstrate that parents cared deeply about their children's souls in the hereafter. Love for and care of children are natural elements of modern peoples' lives. Sigrid Undset was probably right in stating that 'customs change as time goes by, and men's beliefs

²⁷ Sigrid Undset, 'Sankta Sunniva og Seljemennene', in Sigrid Undset, *Norske helgener* (Oslo, 1937), pp. 85–100.

change and they think differently of many things. But the heart of man never changes throughout the ages'.²⁸ The dead children at Selja had been laid to rest in the womb of the church where they would be eternally close to the men of the church in prayer and divine services and thus be cared for in the very best way, even in death.

²⁸ Sigrid Undset, *Fortællinger om kong Artur og ridderne av det runde bord* (Kristiania 1915), p. 252 (my translation).

FOSTERAGE AND DEPENDENCY IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN *GÍSLA SAGA*

Anna Hansen

Saga characters often exercised the option of fostering their children. This meant that a portion of the responsibilities of parenthood were delegated to people who were not the child's biological parents. Although at times it might appear that fosterage was a haphazard practice, with children being relocated from the natal household at the whim of biological parents, this was not the case. Fosterage was systemized, regulated by tradition and law. In most cases, children who were sent away for fosterage were not unwanted, unloved, nor discarded. They were highly esteemed, valued members of both their biological family and their foster-family. Viewing fosterage as a consistent system, however, is challenging. The form of its practice suggests a pattern; but the pattern is neither simple nor immediately obvious. Although in its most basic sense, fosterage was the rearing of a child away from its natal household, copious examples belie this definition. A number of children, such as Egill in *Egils saga*¹ and Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*,² have foster-parents, even though they were reared in their natal homes. The sagas, therefore, portray a variety of fostering practices. However, this is not evidence to suggest that Icelanders disregarded the laws pertaining to fosterage and sent their children to whomever for whatever reason. Rather, it shows that the perceived model of parenthood, which included a number of parenting options, was complex.

It is my aim in this paper to make sense of fosterage as it is represented in the sagas by suggesting that the sagas actually reflect a number of different parenting practices which were generally categorised as fosterage. The Icelandic lawcode *Grágás* is useful as a guide for differentiating these different parenting practices. Laws remained a valuable component in the regulation of activity in the Icelandic Commonwealth

¹ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), ch. 40.

² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), ch. 9.

from the tenth century onwards. It was at this time that laws were imported from Norway and modified to suit the needs of medieval Icelanders.³ Although initially transmitted orally, a decision to codify the laws was made in 1117.⁴ The most complete versions extant have been preserved in two manuscripts: *Konungsbók*, dated around 1260; and *Staðarhólsbók*, dated around 1280.⁵ Thus the extant manuscripts of *Grágás* preserve versions of the law that were current at the time of saga-writing. Although it would be wrong to regard the extant laws as definitive, they do offer a viable guide to the mindset in which saga-characters performed their activities and, as such, offer a valuable means of understanding cultural practices. In this paper, I will use *Grágás* as a guide, to separate, delineate and re-label two parenting practices which are regulated closely by the law: legal fosterage and guardianship. I will then compare them, in order to show that an understanding of the nuances of the Icelandic model of parenthood guided by the law underlies the descriptions of child-rearing in the sagas.

Fosterage has been the focus of much previous scholarship. Its influence on family life was recognised early,⁶ and the important role it played in the weaving of social ties has been acknowledged continuously ever since.⁷ In the most detailed analyses of fosterage to date, its heterogeneity has been examined. So, for example, Gert Kreutzer considers fosterage to be the composite of a number of different child-care practices,⁸ and William Ian Miller distinguishes 'several types of fostering arrangements'.⁹ Fosterage, therefore, is a combination of a number of different parenting practices, which makes it difficult to define precisely. To illustrate this point, it is useful to examine the sagas more closely. An almost textbook example of fosterage is the fostering

³ Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók in Íslendingabók. Landnámabók* ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslenzk fornrit*, 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), ch. 2.

⁴ *Íslendingabók*, ch. 10.

⁵ Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, 'Introduction', in *Laws of Early Iceland. Grágás 1. The Codex Regius of Grágás with material from other manuscripts* (Winnipeg, 1980), p. 13.

⁶ Vilhelm Grönbech, *The Culture of the Teutons* (London, 1931), p. 307.

⁷ Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley, 1982).

⁸ Gert Kreutzer, *Kindheit Und Jugend in Der Altnordischen Literatur* (Münster, 1987), ch. 7.

⁹ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990), p. 122. See also Gunnar Karlsson, 'Barnfóstur á Íslandi að Fornu', in *Míðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2005), pp. 37–61.

of Ingimundr by Ingjaldr in *Vatnsdæla saga*.¹⁰ In this example, the foster-father is honourable, wealthy and respected. He has a good position; he is of moderately high status (chapter 7). As is often the case, the biological father, Þorsteinn, has a higher level of status than the foster-father. He has inherited wealth from a powerful father (chapter 7) and he has embarked on heroic expeditions (chapter 5). The relationship of foster-father to biological father is therefore one where each is capable of contributing to the other's status. When the fostering arrangement is made, it is the foster-father who approaches the biological father. He is already acquainted with the boy, Ingimundr; he has observed the child's talents, and believes that he will grow-up to become a man who will honour his parents. Predicting that the child will become a worthy adult, Ingjaldr wants to be a part of his upbringing and decides to foster him. Ingimundr relocates to Ingjaldr's household, where he becomes the companion of Ingjaldr's sons. Although the saga does not explicitly state that Þorsteinn contributes the material resources necessary to finance Ingimundr's upbringing, that this was the case is implied by a narrative sequence which occurs during Ingimundr's adolescence, which shows Ingimundr goading his father to provide him with a ship for raiding.

In contrast to the fostering of Ingimundr by Ingjaldr, a number of examples can be found in the sagas which do not conform to the normal paradigm of fostering. For example, Þorgerðr in *Egils saga* is Egill's foster-mother.¹¹ She is, however, a servant, and is therefore of significantly lower status than Egill's father, Skalla-Grímr. Her role as foster-mother cannot contribute to the status of either foster-parent or foster-child. Furthermore, the narrative of Egill's childhood clearly shows that he was reared in his father's household and came under the direct, daily authority of his father. Þorgerðr therefore did not oversee the direction of Egill's development. Her role in Egill's life is markedly different from the role which Ingjaldr plays in Ingimundr's. A similar example is that of Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*, whose foster-father is of low status.¹² Hallgerðr also does not relocate to her foster-father's household. The evidence in fact suggests that she was reared under the

¹⁰ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), ch. 7.

¹¹ *Egils saga*, ch. 40.

¹² *Njáls Saga*, ch. 9.

ultimate authority of her biological father.¹³ A third type of fostering is exemplified by the relationship of Gísli to Geirmundr and Guðríðr in *Gísla saga*.¹⁴ No biological parent is present in the text. No higher parental authority is consulted when the children's living arrangements are reconsidered. Although Gísli is referred to as the children's foster-father, this arrangement is closer to that of guardianship than of typical fosterage. I will be examining this relationship more closely later in the paper.

What this small set of examples suggests is that the term *fostr* in the sagas is used to denote a wide variety of parenting arrangements. Scholars have previously categorised these different arrangements as subsets of fosterage. Such a conclusion is based upon a perspective that gives precedence to a saga-directed view of the parenting paradigm. It suggests that, on a basic, idiomatic level, fosterage was considered to be any type of parenting relationship that did not involve a biological parent. That this was the case can be seen in *Finnboga saga*, where the term *fóstra* is used in an unusual circumstance.¹⁵ The child Finnbogi has been exposed by his biological parents and discovered by Gestr and Syrpa, who take it upon themselves to adopt the roles of parenthood (chapter 3). Syrpa is not Finnbogi's biological mother. Neither, however, has she been engaged as a foster-mother. She has acquired the role of mother by unsanctioned, and therefore unregulated, means. There is no word in Old Norse which can adequately describe her relationship to the young baby she has undertaken to rear. The saga-writer, however, clearly believed it was important to distinguish Syrpa's role from that of biological mother, and refers to Syrpa as a *fóstra* (chapter 4).

The saga-guided view which suggests that a foster-parent is any person in a child-caring role who is not the biological parent of that child is vital to an understanding of parent-child relationships in thirteenth-century Iceland. It marginalises the non-biological parent and generalises their role in parenting whilst promoting their vital influence in child-rearing. However, it makes it difficult to assess the impact of fosterage on society, and in particular on the quality of the relation-

¹³ *Njáls Saga*, ch. 1.

¹⁴ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), ch. 10.

¹⁵ *Finnboga saga* in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslensk fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), ch. 4.

ships affected by it. With many differentiations between one fostering arrangement and another, it is hard to make general statements.

A different, and equally valuable, perspective of fosterage can be gained by reformulating parenting categories using a *Grágás*-guided approach. This approach presumes that the definitions of parenting practices outlined by *Grágás* were known by saga-writers, and that it is valid to recategorise the different fostering arrangements into different parenting arrangements based on the laws which regulated child-care practices. In terms of typical fosterage, *Grágás* is brief but clear. According to *Grágás*,

þat er lögfostr er maðr tecr við manne viii. vetra gömlum eða yngra oc fœðe til þes er hann er xvi. vetra gamall.¹⁶

This is, as *Grágás* itself makes explicit, the legal definition of fosterage, and will be referred to through the rest of this paper as legal fosterage. It was important in Iceland that legal fosterage be clearly defined. Ambiguity as to the identity of foster-parents and foster-children would have had disastrous consequences for peace-keeping, as foster-parents and foster-children had both explicit and implicit rights according to the law. For example, a foster-father had the right to kill on behalf of his foster-daughter.¹⁷ *Njáls saga*, in fact, frequently exploits the tension between legal fostering and general perceptions of fostering. So, for example, the saga introduces Þjóstólfr as Hallgerðr's *fóstri* (chapter 9). He is not, however, her legal foster-father, as Hallgerðr was brought up in her father's household (chapter 1). Nevertheless, Þjóstólfr acts on Hallgerðr's behalf; but when he avenges Þorvaldr's abuse of Hallgerðr he steps beyond the boundaries of his role as Hallgerðr's male nanny and attempts to adopt the more official role of legal foster-father (chapter 11). The result is chaos. Nevertheless, Þjóstólfr's behaviour is clearly unsanctioned. He may consider himself Hallgerðr's foster-father; the saga may refer to him as Hallgerðr's foster-father. But he does not have any legal rights. He is not legally her foster-father.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all the various categories of parenting arrangements that fall under the heading 'fosterage'. Although the nanny arrangement, where a person of low status

¹⁶ 'It is legal fosterage when a man takes a boy of eight winters or younger and rears him until he is sixteen winters old': *Grágás*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Konungsbók Text*, 1 (Odense, 1974) p. 161.

¹⁷ *Grágás*, p. 164.

is engaged to care for a child within the natal household, is common, it is not regulated by the laws. In this paper, I will confine myself to those parenting arrangements which are regulated by law: legal fosterage and guardianship.

Legal Fosterage

Legal fosterage was a serious transaction. It involved the delegation of parental responsibility and the exchange of child and resources for quality child-rearing. Not to be entered into lightly, it incorporated economies of honour, status, and, most importantly, assets. Peacefully negotiating the quagmire of ill-will that ensued when fostering went wrong was an enormous and yet essential task. *Grágás* tries to anticipate every possible mishap by instigating some basic laws. So, if a foster-parent returned a child, he was also obliged to return the entire sum of the resources that had been allocated for the maintenance of the child.¹⁸ If a biological parent requested the return of the child, then the resources were to remain with the foster-parent. Provisions were also made in the circumstance of a foster-parent's death. A foster-child could be inherited. However, new foster-parents had the right to decide whether or not they wanted to accept the responsibility of rearing the child. If they returned the child, they were obliged also to return a portion of the resources. Similarly, a biological parent could choose, under these circumstances, to reclaim the child, in which case a portion of the resources was also returned.

These laws illuminate some important characteristics of legal fosterage. For instance, they show that fosterage was a transaction undertaken willingly by the two parties involved. In an ideal context, neither side was pressured to surrender or to accept a child. The laws also demonstrate that fosterage was a fluid arrangement. Both sets of parents had the power to annul the agreement, provided they were willing to bear the financial burden. Perhaps most importantly, though, the laws show that fosterage combined biological parents and foster-parents into a set of parents whose combined obligation it was to assume the role of caring for a child. Biological parents did not forfeit the responsibility of their child when they made fostering arrangements. This can be seen through

¹⁸ *Grágás*, p. 22.

the allocation of resources to foster-parents which shows that biological parents were the ones responsible for financial maintenance of children. Furthermore, biological parents could reclaim their child should he or she fail to thrive in their foster-parents' home. This presumes, then, that biological parents monitored their child, either through direct observation if the foster-parents' household was close to the biological parents' household, or through hearsay. Biological parents therefore remained the final authority on their child's well-being.

Guardianship

In contrast to legal fostering is the practice of guardianship. Icelandic society was so concerned to curb itinerancy that laws were created to ensure that the less able members of society were provided for. Children were therefore assigned a guardian whose main role was to provide material nurturance. It was the biological parents' responsibility to ensure the maintenance of children; they were therefore by default a child's primary guardians.¹⁹ However, it must have been frequently the case that, either through death or mishap, parents were unable to provide for children. The most feared mishaps were death and poverty. If a parent died, the remaining parent retained custody of the child and was therefore responsible for the parenting duties of training and sponsorship into adulthood that anthropologists have suggested are some of the primary obligations of parents.²⁰ The remaining parent, however, was not responsible for nurturance obligations as the heirs to the deceased parent were required to contribute to child maintenance. If neither parent was capable of raising children, either through death or indigence, children were relocated to a new household and were allocated a new guardian. Children were generally divided between father's family and mother's family: two-thirds of the children to the father's family and one-third to the mother's. Guardianship ended when the child turned sixteen winters.

It is easy to see why legal fostering and guardianship were so easily conflated in the minds of medieval Icelanders. Both resulted in a child being reared by someone other than his or her biological parents; both

¹⁹ *Grágás*, p. 5.

²⁰ Esther N. Goody, *Parenthood and Social Reproduction: Fostering and Occupational Roles in West Africa* (Cambridge, 1982).

required a child to move household; both ceased when the child reached the age of majority. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two is so clear in *Grágás* that it would be a mistake to believe that members of the saga-audience were unaware of the differences.

A close comparison between legal fosterage and guardianship as it is described in *Grágás* highlights these differences. Legally fostered children were not destitute. In most cases, their biological parents had wealth and power. William Ian Miller has noted, with particular reference to this type of fostering, that ‘one type of fostering arrangement involved a confirmation of status differentiation between the two households’.²¹ The status differentiation was such that the biological family had higher status than the foster family. This situation is different from that of guardianship. Children who were relocated to another household under the laws of guardianship rather than the laws of fosterage were poor. Their parents could not afford to maintain them, and so they were moved to a more affluent household. In this case, the status differentiation between the old family and the new family was such that the new family had more status. The consequence of a biological family in one arrangement being wealthier than the biological family in the other was not just one of status: it was also one of reallocation of resources. In the case of legal fostering, the material resources necessary for the maintenance of a child were paid to the foster family by the biological family. This resulted in a reallocation of assets from the wealthy to the poor. In contrast, a child who was allocated to a family under the laws of guardianship did not bring with it resources. The new family was required to pay for the maintenance of the child with its own assets. The result was no reallocation of resources between households.

The direction of material resources’ movement is a serious point of difference between legal fosterage and guardianship. It is for this reason that laws pertaining to legal fosterage are brief, whereas the laws pertaining to guardianship are long and complex. Having an indigent child foisted upon a family was clearly undesirable and the laws were required to deal with a world where poor dependents were unwanted. So, for example, *Grágás* anticipates forceful impediments to the delivery of a dependent and instructs the men delivering the child to leave it as close to the household’s property as possible.²² Refusal to accept the

²¹ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 172.

²² *Grágás*, p. 8.

delivery of a dependent was punished with a fine.²³ Incorrect delivery of a dependent, however, could be rectified.

Another significant difference between legal fosterage and guardianship was the role played by biological parents. In the case of legal fosterage, biological parents remained the authority in their children's lives. Foster-parents effectively reared foster-children in such a way as to meet with the biological parents' approval. Biological parents could recall their children home if the quality of rearing in the foster-household was poor. They had the right to maintain contact with their children, and assess the kind of care that they were being given. The real significance of biological parents' authority, however, was not the power that they retained, but the obligations that they were required to meet. In the circumstance of legal fosterage, the foster parent was never required to financially maintain a foster-child. The person who, by default, had to pay for child-rearing was the biological parents. This meant that foster-parents were relieved of financial obligation, and were not obliged to sacrifice their own assets in order to care for the extra member of their household.

The ramifications of the differences between legal fosterage and guardianship were, for children, serious. As biological parents had the right to monitor the welfare of children whom they had sent away for legal fostering, it was in the foster-parents' best interests to treat them well. Furthermore, as the foster-parents of these children normally negotiated the terms of fosterage with biological parents, rather than having a child foisted upon them, they were able to ensure that the child they fostered was someone they wished to incorporate into their household.²⁴ A foster-child did not deplete the resources of foster-parents, and so no hostility was directed towards him or her for causing a diminishment in prosperity. As a result, children who were fostered frequently found themselves living in a household where they were esteemed and respected.²⁵

²³ *Grágás*, p. 9.

²⁴ Elsewhere I have argued that a foster-parent's ability to choose whom they fostered and under what conditions meant that they had a greater control over the circumstances of foster-parenthood than biological parents had over parenthood. For this reason, I have argued, foster-parents often were more attached to their foster-children than biological parents were to their own children. See Anna Hansen, 'Representations of Children in Early Icelandic Society' (unpublished thesis, Sydney University, 2006), p. 168.

²⁵ See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Astin á tímum þjóðveldisins', in *Miðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2005), pp. 63–86.

In contrast, a guardian did not have control over the children who were delivered into his care. Bound by law, guardians and their wards were often required to associate with one another even if they had conflicting temperaments. As such, children who had been allocated to guardians were less valued. This attitude towards dependents is reflected in the sagas. For example, a scene from *Njáls saga* depicts three children playing on the floor. Two of the children are described as *veizlusveinar Þjóstólfs* (chapter 8). *Veizlusveinn* is a compound, integrating *veizlu*, which means ‘gift’ or ‘help’, and *sveinn* meaning boy.²⁶ The compound has the sense of a boy needing help. The children are male dependents under Þjóstólfr’s care. Despite Þjóstólfr’s role as their guardian, which meant that he was obliged to protect them, Hǫskuldr is able to beat the boy without impunity (chapter 8). Not a single member of Þjóstólfr’s household, nor Þjóstólfr himself, does anything to prevent the beating. It is left to Hrútr, Hǫskuldr’s brother, to remedy the action. The scene thus suggests that when children were given to the care of a guardian under the laws of dependence, they were not necessarily esteemed by the guardian, and consequently not well-protected.

Due to their low status, dependents are not prominent in the sagas. Rarely do they play a significant role in the narrative. An intriguing exception is *Gísli saga*. In this saga, Gísli and Þorkell have the care of two dependent children, a boy named Geirmundr and a girl named Guðríðr. There is no indication as to which child had been allocated to which brother. While Gísli and Þorkell share a household, it seems, they share joint custody of the children. When Gísli and Þorkell decide to divide their household, they must also divide the children. The division is not official. The case is not taken to the Alþingi, witnesses are not called, and oaths are not sworn. Instead, Gísli and Þorkell decide between themselves who will take which child. The arrangement for the division that Gísli and Þorkell agree upon is to have Gísli do the actual division of assets and liabilities, while Þorkell is then given the opportunity to choose which portion of the division he would like as his share. The implication, therefore, is that when it comes to the division of the dependents, it is Gísli’s task to divide the children, and it is Þorkell’s task to decide which child to take. Þorkell takes the boy,

²⁶ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982); Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over Det Gamle Norske Sprog: Nytt Uforandret Opptrykk* Av 2. Utgave (1883–96) (Oslo, 1954).

Geirmundr, in all likelihood because it is more advantageous for a farmer to have responsibility of a male child, who can then participate in farm work, than it is to have the responsibility for a female child.²⁷ The girl, Guðríðr, is left to be brought up by Gísli.²⁸

Gísli's decision to be the one to divide the assets and the liabilities is disingenuous. Superficially, it seems that he is being generous: he is allowing Þorkell to choose the assets and liabilities that he would most prefer to possess. In reality, Gísli is not at risk of losing the farm, the asset that would be most important to him, as Þorkell has already intimated that he wishes to take the moveable goods.²⁹ In offering to be the one to divide the assets and liabilities, then, Gísli ensures that he is not the one to make an active decision between taking responsibility for the care of Geirmundr and taking responsibility for the care of Guðríðr; and so, as far as both of the children are concerned, Gísli has rejected neither of them. The result is that Gísli maintains the loyalty and affection of both children. This is a crucial aspect of the plot of *Gísli saga*. The girl Guðríðr remains, as one would expect, loyal to her guardian Gísli. She reveals this loyalty by acting on one occasion as a reliable messenger between Gísli and Þorkell.³⁰ In this scene, Guðríðr, whom the saga now describes as Gísli's *fóstra* ('foster-daughter'),³¹ is sent to Þorkell's new homestead, called Sæból. She is being sent on this errand with the purpose of observing the activities of Þorkell and Þorkell's brother-in-law, Þorgrímr, whom Gísli suspects of having been recently involved in the killing of Vésteinn, the brother of Gísli's wife. Guðríðr returns from her errand with evidence that reinforces Gísli's suspicions. She says that at Sæból she saw that

Þorgrímr sat með hjálm ok sverð ok ǫllum herbúnaði, en Þorgrímr nef hafði bolœxi í hendi, en Þorkell hafði sverð ok brugðit af handfang.³²

Guðríðr's description, particularly of Þorkell, does not lack consequences. Although Gísli is fairly certain, before he sends his foster-daughter on

²⁷ Evidence to support this suggestion can be found in chapter 10 of the saga. In this chapter, Geirmundr is described as performing physical acts of farm labour: *Gísli saga*, ch. 10.

²⁸ *Gísli saga*, ch. 10.

²⁹ *Gísli saga*, ch. 10.

³⁰ *Gísli saga*, ch. 13.

³¹ *Gísli saga*, ch. 13.

³² 'Þorgrímr sat with helmet and sword and was prepared for fighting, Þorgrímr nef had a wood-axe in his hand, and Þorkell had a sword and had drawn it a hand span': *Gísli saga*, ch. 13.

her errand, that at least one of the members of the Sæból household is responsible for the killing of Vésteinn, the evidence that Guðríðr brings with her upon her return is compelling enough to goad Gísli into action: he kills Þorgrímr in an act of retaliation for having killed Vésteinn.³³

Guðríðr's description of the scene at Sæból does not lead to Þorkell's death. Þorkell, in fact, remains unscathed while these acts of retaliation for killings are being exchanged. However, this is not because Guðríðr has interfered with the proceedings in such a way as to protect her former foster-father from harm; it is due to Gísli's own decision, and his reluctance to kill his brother. As far as Guðríðr is concerned, her evidence condemns Þorkell. She shows no loyalty or affection for the man who formerly shared guardianship of her. However, this is not the case when it comes to the boy, Geirmundr. From the beginning, as soon as Geirmundr has been settled within his new household, the boy reveals a deep loyalty for his former guardian, Gísli. He shows this before Vésteinn's death, when Vésteinn, riding home from the coast after a prolonged trip abroad, stops at Sæból. Geirmundr is clearly aware of the hostility between the Sæból household members and Vésteinn. He sees Vésteinn before any of the other household members do, and he says to him, '*Kom þú ekki hér á Sæból ok far til Gísla*'.³⁴ Geirmundr's advice is prudent. It temporarily saves Vésteinn's life. Importantly, however, in offering Vésteinn good advice, Geirmundr defies his foster-father, Þorkell.

Perhaps the most startling display of Geirmundr's continuing affection for Gísli is the role that Geirmundr plays in the death of Þorgrímr. Geirmundr's relationship to Þorgrímr is ambiguous. Initially, Geirmundr is the dependent of Gísli and Þorkell. However, when Gísli and Þorkell dissolve their householding arrangements, Þorkell unites with Þorgrímr. As Geirmundr moves with Þorkell, it would seem that he has exchanged one pair of guardians for another. Þorgrímr, however, is related to Þorkell by marriage, not by blood. As Gísli and Þorkell are brothers, guardianship of the dependents would have fallen to them simultaneously. As Þorgrímr is married to Gísli's and Þorkell's sister, however, his obligation to the dependents was more removed. Whereas Gísli and Þorkell were equal partners in the guardianship of

³³ *Gísli saga*, ch. 16.

³⁴ 'Don't stop here at Sæból but go to Gísli's': *Gísli saga*, ch. 12.

Geirmundr and Guðrídr in the beginning, after Þorkell's move, Þorkell becomes Geirmundr's sole guardian. In the newly formed household of Þorkell and Þorgrímr, however, Þorgrímr is clearly the superior householder. Geirmundr, therefore, finds himself living under the authority of a man who has no obligation to care for him. The difficulty of the arrangement is revealed in the scene of the tapestries, where Þorgrímr asks Geirmundr to collect tapestries from Gísli. Þorgrímr's choice of errand-boy is poor. In asking Geirmundr to perform this task, Þorkell forces Geirmundr to choose between his obligation to his household leader and his affection for his former guardian. Geirmundr refuses and receives a slap from Þorgrímr for his disobedience (chapter 15), an act which leads to Geirmundr's betrayal and Þorgrímr's death. On the surface, it seems as though Geirmundr has acted inappropriately. He is obliged to remain loyal to the head of his householder. As a minor, however, Geirmundr's obligations are not those of adults. His obligation is to his guardian: it is Þorkell whom he should obey. But when Þorkell reneges on his obligations as a guardian and refuses to protect Geirmundr from corporal discipline, Geirmundr has the right to seek protection from his former guardian, Gísli. He does this by conspiring with Gísli to remove Þorgrímr from his position of authority.³⁵ The ability of dependents to play a vital role in the unfolding of crucial events in *Gísli saga* demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the powerless. Neither Þorkell nor Þorgrímr consider Geirmundr an important person, able to affect the course of their lives. Gísli, however, recognises that the loyalty of even the weak can benefit him. Wisely, Gísli cultivates the affection and loyalty of his dependents, with the result that his plans are facilitated, and his life protected.

Much is already known about the practice of fosterage in early Icelandic society, for example, the bonds of affection that formed between foster-children and their foster-kin. Conflict between affection for foster-kin and obligation to biological family forms the central drama in some of the most poignant of the *Íslendingasögur*, and the nature of that conflict has been examined extensively. Nevertheless, there is still much that has not been considered concerning the nature of fosterage. *Grágás* offers a means by which the intricate nature of different parenting arrangements can be discerned. It suggests a fundamental distinction between two parenting arrangements that have both previously been described

³⁵ *Gísli saga*, ch. 16.

as fosterage: legal fosterage and guardianship. Using *Grágás* as a guide to saga-exegesis allows a nuanced interpretation of the narrative concerning parent–child relationships that clarifies the motivations behind many saga actions. Thus, understanding guardianship and dependency in Iceland helps us to understand better the complex situation in which Geirmundr of *Gísla saga* finds himself following the dissolution of Gísli and Þorkell's household. Torn between affection and loyalty for both his former guardian and his current guardian, he nevertheless attempts to honour his obligations. These attempts are rewarded with corporal punishment. Betrayed, then, by his current guardian, he sides with his former guardian and joins the plot to kill Þorgrímr. In accepting a role in the killing of Þorgrímr, Geirmundr shows that the weak should not be ignored. He uses his position in society to show that the powerless, indigent and unrecognised are capable of orchestrating catastrophic events.

THE BIRTH, CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE OF THE EARLY ICELANDIC BISHOPS

Bernadine McCreesh

The Literary and Historical Background

Iceland converted to Christianity in AD 999. For the next half-century the country was served by missionary bishops from England and Germany. The first known native Icelandic priest—and also the first native bishop—was Ísleifr Gizurarson, who was born around 1005, was consecrated bishop in 1056, and died in 1080. He founded a school at Skálholt, which became the seat of the southern diocese. In 1106, a separate see was established at Hólar to serve the northern part of the country, with Jón Ögmundarson as its first bishop. The Christian law-codes of *Grágás* were composed between 1122 and 1133, and the first Icelandic monastery was founded at Þingeyrar in 1133. Translated saints' lives (*Heilagra manna sögur*) and other religious writings date from about 1150 onwards. By then, clerical training was well established, and many secular chieftains were also priests.

This state of affairs continued until 1190, when a law was passed forbidding chieftains to be in holy orders. This law is thought to have provided the impetus for secular saga-writing, because it provided the country with a large body of educated laymen who might no longer wish to exercise their literary talents in the service of the Church. The *konunga sögur* (lives of the kings of Norway) were, in fact, written between 1190 and 1230. Shortly after that, the first *Íslendingasögur* or sagas of Icelanders—semi-historical accounts of the fates and fortunes of the country's leading families from the time of the Settlement to the early eleventh century—started to be set down in writing.

The early thirteenth century also saw the composition of the earliest *byskupa sögur* or bishops' sagas, which recount the lives of several of the bishops of Iceland who reigned from the twelfth to the fourteenth century.¹ Þorlák of Skálholt (reigned 1176–1193), the patron saint of

¹ *Byskupa sögur*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 3 vols (Reykjavík, 1953) [hereafter *BS*]. The versions of the bishops' lives used in this study are: *Hungvaka* in *BS*, I, pp. 1–31; *Þorláks*

Iceland, was the country's first canonized bishop and the first to have his *vita* written, followed rapidly by that of Jón Ögmundarson of Hólar (1106–1121).² Another—unsuccessful—candidate for canonization was Guðmundar Arason of Hólar (1203–1237); four versions of his life are extant. The life of another bishop of Hólar, Laurentius Kálfsson (1324–1331), was written in the fourteenth century in the hagiographic style, although there was no movement to have him canonized. In addition, we possess very down-to-earth lives of two other bishops of Skálholt, Páll Jónsson (1195–1211) and Árni Þorláksson (1269–1298), as well as a brief compendium of the lives of the first five bishops of Skálholt known as *Hungurvaka* ('Hunger-waker' or 'Appetizer').³

On the continent of Europe, bishop-saints had started to become popular towards the end of the fifth century. As time passed, these saints progressed from being simply pious to being both pious and powerful; an example of the latter type of bishop-saint would be Gregory the Great. Starting in the tenth century and continuing through the eleventh, sanctity moved from powerful bishops into powerful families, giving rise to the *Adelheilige* ('noble saint'), what Vauchez terms 'une nouvelle conception de la sainteté, fondée sur une naissance illustre, l'exercice de l'autorité et la possession de richesses souvent considérables, mises au service de la propagation de la foi chrétienne'.⁴ Examples of *Adelheiligen* would be Edward the Confessor in England, and St Olaf in Norway. Bishops of noble birth continued to be canonized during the twelfth century, although, especially in England, their function was often that of a critic of the king rather than an upholder of royal power; Thomas Becket is an example of this type of saint. In the thirteenth century, saints' lives started to be written in the vernacular, and, at the same time, there was a growing interest in familiar and contemporary

saga byskups in *BS*, I, pp. 33–129; *Páls saga byskups* in *BS*, I, pp. 251–83; *Árna saga byskups* in *BS*, I, pp. 285–457; *Jóns saga Helga eftir Gunnlaug munk* in *BS*, II, pp. 1–74; *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* in *BS*, II, pp. 167–389; *Guðmundar saga Arasonar eftir Arngrím ábóta* in *BS*, III, pp. 145–474; *Laurentius saga* in *BS*, III, pp. 1–144.

² The *vitae* of these two bishops were written first in Latin and then in Icelandic; apart from a few Latin fragments of Þorlák's life, only the Icelandic versions are still extant.

³ For full details of dates and manuscripts, see Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Biskupa sögur', in *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York and London, 1993), pp. 45–46.

⁴ André Vauchez, 'Le saint', in *L'homme médiéval*, ed. by Jacques Le Goff (Paris, 1989), pp. 345–80 (p. 354).

figures, a vogue which reached its zenith in the mystics, prophets and preachers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

As far as portraits of childhood are concerned, the *vitae* of medieval saints are often stereotyped. A holy child usually falls into one or more of four broad categories: i) the sinless child; ii) the penitential child; iii) the rebellious child; or iv) the child marked by a portent.⁵ The child marked by a portent is probably the most common category. The portent can take many forms, although dreams and strange natural phenomena predominate, and it can occur at one or more points in the saint's childhood. Examples are found in the New Testament stories of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity and the Presentation in the Temple. Childhood portents are actually remarkably convenient: those who could vouch for their authenticity or non-authenticity are normally dead by the time the *vita* is being written, which may account in part for the popularity of the motif. As for the other themes, after receiving a sign, the penitential child gives up typical childish behaviour and devotes himself to God; an example can be found in the life of St Cuthbert. The sinless child was a popular figure up to the twelfth century; saints tended to follow 'the pattern of the dutiful son who followed parental wishes as they took him into a religious education, then to ecclesiastical office, and ultimately to sainthood'.⁶ The rebellious child goes into religion against his parents'—normally his father's—wishes, and belongs mainly to the fourteenth century, although earlier examples, such as St Martin of Tours, can be found.⁷

The Bishops' Sagas

To what extent do the *vitae* of the early Icelandic bishops follow these patterns? Since the bishops reigned from the late twelfth to early fourteenth century, their lives do not altogether fit in with European hagiographic trends. One must remember, however, that Iceland was not settled, let alone converted, in the heyday of Continental bishop-saints. In addition, Iceland did not have a king and a court, making it rather difficult to produce *Adelheiligen*. Consequently, Icelanders had to

⁵ The first three categories are taken from Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell's description of St Louis (Aloysius) of Gonzaga: *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago, 1982), p. 26.

⁶ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints & Society*, p. 48.

⁷ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints & Society*, p. 64.

make do with bishop-saints, most of whom were related to the leading families of Iceland and therefore *adel* by Icelandic standards. Both Þorlákr and Guðmundr, like twelfth-century English bishops, were defenders of the Church against secular encroachment. In addition, Guðmundr, the people's bishop who went around with a rag-tag collection of beggars and unemployed and was credited with supernatural and miracle-working abilities, approaches the type of the popular preacher of the fourteenth century and is thus ahead of his time.

For a long time the general assumption has been that *byskupa sögur* evolved out of European hagiographic literature. Régis Boyer has already made a list of all the echoes of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great in them.⁸ Peter Koppenberg has pointed out their possible debts to hagiography.⁹ Not everyone adheres to the theory of European sources, though. Margaret Cormack, for example, suggests that Icelandic oral tradition may have played a part in the development Icelandic hagiography: 'Rarely is there any discussion of the influence of native literature on the saints' lives, although evidence from other literary traditions shows that such influences may be quite strong.'¹⁰ Is there a possibility that the accounts of the childhood of Iceland's first bishops and first native saints could have evolved out of a native heroic-historical tradition rather than a European hagiographic one?

St Þorlákr

Þorláks saga, like the other works produced in the diocese of Skálholt, displays few of the features traditionally associated with hagiography. Like *Íslendingasögur*—and the other *byskupa sögur*—it starts with a genealogical introduction:

Faðir Þorláks var Þórhallr, en móðir Halla. Þau váru vinsæl ok vel at sér. Hann var farmaðr, áðr hann setti bú, en hon var fengsöm ok forvitra.¹¹

⁸ 'The Influence of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues* on Old Icelandic Literature,' in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, ed. by P. Foote, H. Pálsson and D. Slay (London, 1973), pp. 1–27.

⁹ *Hagiographische Studien zu den Biskupa Sögur* (Bochum, 1980).

¹⁰ 'Saints' Lives and Icelandic Literature in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries' in *Saints and Sagas: a Symposium*, ed. by Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Birte Carlé (Odense, 1994), pp. 27–47 (p. 29).

¹¹ *BS*, I, p. 37: 'Þorlákr's father was Þórhallr and his mother Halla; they were popular and of good reputation. He had been a merchant before he set up house and she was wise and generous.'

This is actually a remarkably short introduction. Genealogies in *Íslendingasögur* often go back to the Settlement, and some even describe the events that drove the protagonists' forbears from Norway. The genealogies in *byskupa sögur* are shorter, going back only two or three generations, but the writers are careful to include any members of the bishop's extended family who happen to be in holy orders. A suggested reason for the lack of ancestry in *Þorláks saga* is that it may have been influenced by the Latin version of the saga; this version, of which only fragments are extant, may have been intended for consumption outside Iceland by an audience unfamiliar with, and not interested in, genealogy.

Þorlákr's birth is situated in time and place,¹² but we know very little about the boy and his family other than the fact that his parents got into financial difficulties and split up, upon which his mother took him to the priest Eyjolfur to be trained as a clerk. Future bishops who, like Þorlákr Þórhallsson, had no father to instruct them were sent for 'fostering'¹³ either to a learned priest who ran a school, or, as happened with Guðmundr, to an uncle who was in holy orders. There are, in fact, indications that going into the Church was an accepted career-path for young men of good family who were in straitened circumstances. Guðmundr lost his father at an early age, and Laurentius's mother, like Þorlákr's, is described as being short of money after her husband and his uncle passed away. Laurentius and Þorlákr seem to have been bookishly inclined and content with their lot, but Guðmundr, on the other hand, was not. Of him it is said:

Ok tækr Ingimundr, föðurbróðir hans, við honum at kenna honum ok föstra hann, ok tækr hann þat fyrst í föðurbætr, at hann var barðr til bækr.¹⁴

Since Guðmundr was illegitimate, he could not inherit from his dead father. Being born out of wedlock does not seem to have been a hindrance in the Icelandic Church, since both Guðmundr and Páll, whose mother was the concubine of the chieftain Jón Loptsson, rose to the rank of

¹² BS, I, p. 36.

¹³ 'Fostering' in *Íslendingasögur* refers to the custom whereby children were brought up in the home of another family; the foster-family was normally of lower social status than the child's family. In the bishops' sagas, on the other hand, the fostering priest is a learned man and appears to be the child's family's social equal, if not their superior. See Hansen, this volume.

¹⁴ BS, II, p. 182: 'And his father's brother, Ingimundr, took him to teach him and foster him, and as compensation for his father he was beaten to make him learn.'

bishop.¹⁵ On the other hand, illegitimacy does not seem to have been a desirable state for a future saint, because, when Abbot Arngrímr rewrote Guðmundr's *vita* in the fourteenth century in an attempt to have the good bishop canonized, he removed the details of Guðmundr's mother's being forced against her will into an unhappy marriage, and merely stated who the bishop's parents were.

As far as character is concerned, Þorlákr bears a much greater resemblance to a saint than to a saga-hero. He belongs, in fact, to the type of the 'sinless child':

Hann var ólíkr flestum ungum mönnum í sinni uppfæðingu, auðráðr ok auðveldr í öllu, hlýðinn ok hugþekkr hverjum manni, fálátr ok fálýndr um allt, nýtr ok námgiarn þegar á unga aldri.¹⁶

This is evidently an idealized portrait. However, Icelandic hagiographers did seem to think that future saints should be model children. *Jón varð innan skamms tíma inn fullkomnasti lærisveinn í allri reglu guðligrar siðsemdar ok bóklígrar vísku*.¹⁷ Even uncanonized bishops were good children: Laurentius studied instead of playing with his fellow-clerks and seemed to make himself rather unpopular in the process.¹⁸

Guðmundr is the only one of the bishops who is badly behaved:

Hann var ólatr mjök, ok þótti þat þegar auðsætt, at honum mundi í kynn kippa um athöfn hans ok ódælleika, því at hann vildi ráða at sínum hluta, ef hann mætti, við hvern er hann átti, en fyrir þat var fóstri hans harðr við hann ok réð honum mjök.¹⁹

Guðmundr actually conforms quite well to the ideal of the child in *Íslendingasögur*. According to Foote and Wilson, 'people liked to see signs of manliness in a child, and this meant chiefly admiration for

¹⁵ A papal dispensation was normally required before an illegitimate man could be consecrated bishop, but does not seem to have been necessary in these two cases. For an example of an archbishop's refusal to consecrate a bishop, see Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 156–57.

¹⁶ *BS*, I, p. 37: 'He was unlike most young men in his upbringing, pliant and easy in everything; obedient and obliging to everyone, quiet and reserved, and eager to learn even at a young age'.

¹⁷ *BS*, II, p. 7: 'Jón became within a short time the most accomplished pupil in all rules of divine habits and bookish wisdom'.

¹⁸ *BS*, III, p. 8.

¹⁹ *BS*, II, p. 182: 'He wasn't at all lazy, and it was immediately evident that he would take after his kinsmen in his behaviour and overbearing nature, since he wanted to have his own way, if he could, whoever he was dealing with. For this reason his guardian Ingimundr was hard on him and chastised him a lot'.

the obstreperous and defiant boy.²⁰ Obstreperousness and defiance do not, however, seem to be desirable characteristics in candidates for canonization, for Abbot Arngrímr once again changed Guðmundr's *vila*, this time to present the naughty and strong-willed little boy in a much more favourable light:

Var því Guðmundar uppfæddr með móðurfrændum sínum, þegar til bækr settir á skilningaraldri, hlýðinn ok auðmjúkr sínum meistara sem öllum öðrum, er honum vildu gott kenna.²¹

The figure of the 'penitential child', of which Guðmundr is an example, was well established in hagiography, but the writers of the lives of Icelandic saints seem not to have favoured the type.²² In *Íslendingasögur*, too, the lazy youngster who unexpectedly turns into a hero—the secular equivalent of the penitential child—is rare.²³ To quote Stefán Einarsson, 'the sagas usually display Aristotelian-like unchanging characters'.²⁴ So the description of Guðmundr has been deliberately changed to make him into both the saintly child of hagiography and the unchanging character of saga-tradition.

As well as being the sinless children of hagiography, St Þorlákr—and the other Bishops of Skálholt whose childhood is described—all bear a certain resemblance to the precocious child of saga-narrative, although their precocity takes the form of ability with books rather than weapons.²⁵ [*Þorlákr*] *nam psaltara, áðr en sundr skilja yrði börn móður hans ok föður, en lítit hafði hann bóknám annat í fyrstu*.²⁶ This precociousness continues through his adolescence, for he is ordained at the early age

²⁰ Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London, 1974), p. 116.

²¹ *BS*, III, p. 154: 'Guðmundr was brought up with his mother's relatives and put to learning as soon as he reached the age of understanding. He was obedient and humble towards his teacher and to all others who wanted to teach him good things'.

²² There is evidence of widespread devotion on the island to St Cuthbert, who had started off as a boisterous lad and settled down only after being rebuked by a younger child; unfortunately, no extant saga of St Cuthbert exists to show if this feature of his life was changed in Iceland or not: see Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland* (Brussels, 1994), pp. 40, 47, 93.

²³ Anna Hansen gives two examples in 'The Precocious Child: a Difficult Thirteenth-Century Saga Ideal' in *Papers of the Twelfth International Saga Conference*, ed. by Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer (Bonn, 2003), p. 222.

²⁴ *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York, 1957), p. 149.

²⁵ For a discussion of precocious children in *Íslendingasögur*, see Hansen, 'The Precocious Child', pp. 220–28.

²⁶ *BS*, I, p. 37: '[Þorlákr] learned the psalter before his parents broke up, even though he had little book-learning at first'.

of eighteen; he then acquires a parish and manages to save enough money to go abroad to study in Paris and Lincoln.²⁷ The other Bishops of Skálholt are equally precocious. Of Páll it is said: *Hann var næmr ok vel lærðr þegar á unga aldri*.²⁸ The description of Árni is similar: *Þessi Árni va á unga aldri fálátr ok aktaði mjök ýmisligar íþróttir*.²⁹ Þorlákr Runólfsson is also precocious: *Hann var snemmendis skynsamr*.³⁰ Although the Bishops of Hólar were good scholars, none of them are depicted as being as obviously precocious as those of the southern diocese. Laurentius may have been foremost in his class at school, but his success seems to have been achieved through hard work. These bishops' particular gifts, such as Jón's harp-playing and Laurentius's ability to compose Latin verse, appear in young adulthood rather than childhood.

Other character traits also manifest themselves in childhood. Laurentius seems to have been a sanctimonious prig at school; as an adult, he denounces his superior's laxness and incurs his wrath as a result. Þorlákr is economical when he is a young parish-priest; once consecrated bishop, he puts the diocese back on a sound financial footing after his predecessor's extravagance. Guðmundr is not an easy child, and in later life he becomes not the puppet bishop that his family is hoping for but a militant upholder of Church rights and a defender of the poor and downtrodden. This psychologically realistic prefiguring of future events is more subtle than what is usually found in medieval hagiography, in which character traits are often limited to holiness and prefiguring to supernatural portents. The reason for the psychological realism in the bishops' sagas undoubtedly stems from the fact the authors of all the sagas except Jón's were writing shortly after their subjects died and drawing on actual memories of the saints' actions.

Jón Ögmundarson

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, canonization was still a local affair, and Þorlákr was pronounced a saint shortly after his death by

²⁷ In *The Christianization of Iceland* (Oxford, 2000), p. 204, Orri Vésteinsson suggests that Þorlákr's studies abroad were financed by the Oddaverjar family. If so, Þorlákr was definitely not the family's puppet.

²⁸ *BS*, I, p. 254: 'He was good at memorization and scholarly even at a young age'.

²⁹ *BS*, I, p. 289: 'This Árni was quiet from a young age and studied various things'.

³⁰ *BS*, I, p. 15: 'He was very wise from an early age'.

the Alþingi, or National Assembly of Iceland. This must have created a certain amount of consternation in the diocese of Hólar, for, shortly afterwards, people became very much aware of Bishop Jón of Hólar's saintliness, although he had by then been dead for over a hundred years. His *vita* is obviously written to substantiate his claim to sainthood.

If Þorlákr is short on family connections, the same cannot be said of Jón. We are told that his forbears on his mother's side go back to one of the first baptized Icelanders in the eastern part of the country; his father's side of the family trace their ancestry to the Settlement. In addition, the author of *Jóns saga* attempts to link Jón and his parents to the royal families of Scandinavia. In an almost certainly apocryphal scene, Jón's mother is taken by her parents at eight years of age to the court of the king of Norway, where St Olaf says of her: *Hon verðr mikill lykkumaðr ok sá mun göfgastr ættbogi á Íslandi, er frá henni kemr*.³¹ Later, when Jón is a child and the family is staying at the Danish court, Astrid the queen mother tells Jón's mother not to slap the child's hands when he tries to take food before the feast has started because *hendr þessar [...] eru byskups hendr* ('those hands [...] are bishop's hands').³²

These predictions clearly belong to the hagiographic tradition of the child marked by a portent, the predictions in this case being the portent. The scenes have Biblical overtones of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1. 26–35) and Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1. 39–56).³³ The motifs themselves, however, belong to the Icelandic tradition. Young men in the sagas very often start their careers by paying a visit to the court of Norway or another Scandinavian country, and the reigning monarch sometimes makes predictions about his visitor. The visits to royal courts also link *Jóns saga* with the *Adelheilige* tradition in hagiography. Even if Jón is not of noble birth, his mother consorts with royal families and he is as *adel* as it is possible to be in Iceland.

³¹ BS, II, p. 6: 'She will be a very fortunate person, and the noblest family in Iceland will descend from her'.

³² BS, II, p. 5. Could these court visits have been inspired by Jón's historical visits to the courts of Norway and Denmark when he was a young man?

³³ The use of biblical motifs is also found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar enn mesta*, the first version of which is ascribed to Gunnlaugr Leifsson: the future King Óláfr is born in humble circumstances; his mother and the elderly man accompanying her have to flee to a distant country; wise men from another country see brightness surrounding the child.

Jón's holiness, like that of many other saints, is apparent at birth. Guðini the Good, who seems to appear solely for the purpose of making a prophecy, says:

Þessi maðr er sannliga heilagleiks spegill ok sýnir í sínu bjarta yfirbragði þann mann, sem einkanliga er valdr af guði til heilagrar þjónustu.³⁴

This again is a feature of Continental hagiography, since references to a newborn's future are almost nonexistent in Old Icelandic literature.

Koppenberg suggests that the inspiration for the 'bishop's hands' scene comes from Paulinus of Milan's *Life* of Ambrosius, of which there is an Icelandic version extant. In *Ambrosius saga byskups*, the child Ambrose asks his sister to kiss his hands the way he has seen his mother kiss the hands of visiting ecclesiastical dignitaries. Later on, when he returns from Rome as a bishop, *ok þa er þær kyssa hond hans eptir sidveniu manna, þa brosir hann at oc mællti: 'Nu kyssit id byskupshond þessa, sem ek sagda yckr fyrir löngu.'*³⁵ Hands have, in fact, long been associated with bishops: confirmation is known as the 'laying on of hands'. Looked at in another way, the scene almost seems to have been drawn from life; it is not difficult to imagine a mother swatting her son's hands as he tries to filch some goodies from the table before a feast has officially started.

Guðmundr Arason

Ambrosius saga was certainly known to the author of *Guðmundar saga*. In three specific places—at birth, in childhood, in young adulthood—there are echoes of incidents in the *Life* of St Ambrose. Shortly after Guðmundr's birth, a wise man hears the baby cry and says, *þat barn mundi verða afbragð annarra manna, ef lífi heldi*. ('That child would become a man of mark, if he lived'.)³⁶ A similar phrase is found in *Ambrosius saga*, after a swarm of bees has flown into, and out of, the baby Ambrosius' mouth: *Til mikils nökkurs skal sia fæddr, ef lífi helldr*. ('He will be born for

³⁴ *BS*, II, p. 40: 'This person is truly a mirror of holiness and in his bright countenance can be seen a man who has been especially chosen by God for His holy service'.

³⁵ *Heilagra Manna Sögur*, ed. by C.R. Unger, 2 vols (Christiania, 1877), I, p. 30: 'They [his sister and step-sister] kissed his hand according to the custom, and then he smiled and said, "Now you're kissing the bishop's hand, as I told you you would long ago"'.
³⁶ *BS*, I, p. 172.

great things, if he lives.')³⁷ Whereas the phrase 'if he lives/lived' makes sense in *Ambrosius saga*, it does not in *Guðmundar saga*, since the baby's life is not in any obvious danger.

The author of *Guðmundar saga* actually refers to *Ambrosius saga* in a remark credited to Guðmundr's cousin. Whenever Guðmundr and his cousin played together as children, the cousin was given weapons while Guðmundr got a bishop's mitre and crozier. Later on, when trying to persuade Guðmundr to become a bishop, his cousin says:

En þér mun ekki stoða undan at teljast, því at þér mun fara sem Ambrosio byskupi, föstra þínum. Þér spáðu barnleikar fyrir sem honum, at þú mundir byskup verða. Nú gerði honum ok ekki undan at teljast, enda mun þér svá, ok viljum vér eigi annan byskup en þik.³⁸

A third incident in *Guðmundar saga* is also reminiscent of a scene in the *Life* of St Ambrose. Once, when St Þorlákr is consecrating a church, Guðmundr stays chatting with other clerks instead of attending the service. His uncle says:

Farðu til tíða ok kirkjuvígslu ok hygg at vandliga, því at eigi veit, hverr til þarf at taka, en ek hygg sá, er nema þarf, at hann muni eigi at betra manni nema ok skynsamara en þeim, sem nú skal þetta embætti fremja hér.³⁹

The writer of the saga then comments:

Þetta var tvöfaldr spáleikr, því at hvárttveggja kom fram síðan, þat er í hans orðum bjó, at Þorlákr byskup var sannheilagr maðr, en Guðmundr þurftu þessa þjónustu at fremja.⁴⁰

The scene in the *Life* of St Ambrose runs thus: 'Go', said the prefect, with unconscious prophecy, 'conduct thyself not as a judge, but as

³⁷ *Heilagra Manna Sögur*, I, p. 29. Gert Kreutzer has already commented on these similarities between *Ambrosius saga* and *Guðmundar saga*: *Kindheit und Jugend in der altnordischen Literatur* (Munster, 1987), p. 152.

³⁸ *BS*, I, p. 258: 'You cannot fight against it, because the same thing will happen to you as to your patron, Bishop Ambrose. Your childhood games, like his, foretold that you would become a bishop. He could not oppose it, and you won't either, and we want no bishop other than you'.

³⁹ 'Go to the services and the consecration of the church, and pay careful attention to them, for no one knows who will have to take on the job, but I think that anybody who needs to learn could not learn from a better or wiser man than the one who shall now say mass here'.

⁴⁰ *BS*, I, p. 195: 'That was a twofold prophecy, because each of the things happened afterwards that he had said, for Bishop Þorlákr was a truly saintly man, and Guðmundr had to perform this duty'.

bishop.⁴¹ This incident is actually missing from the extant version of *Ambrosius saga* recorded in *Heilagra Manna Sögur*, and so the similarity between the two scenes may be fortuitous.⁴²

Laurentius Kalfsson

Our last bishop is Laurentius Kalfsson. *Laurentius saga* was written in the fourteenth century and is clearly influenced by hagiographic conventions, especially in the part dealing with Laurentius's birth and childhood. Laurentius is marked by a portent even before he is born, for the fact that he will one day become a bishop is revealed to his pregnant mother in a dream in which she imagines that a ring with the likeness of a bishop on it is pressed into her hand at the church in Hólar.⁴³ This dream is very much in the hagiographic tradition,⁴⁴ since dreams in Icelandic sagas tend to foretell the upcoming death of one or more characters. Birth or pre-birth dreams are extremely rare.

Laurentius's birth also has an element of the miraculous. The baby is overdue, and when he is finally born he shows no sign of life until Reverend Þórarinn promises to consecrate him to St Lawrence, whose feast-day it is.⁴⁵ Why Reverend Þórarinn calls upon St Lawrence, a foreign saint who is not known for saving young children, rather than Þorlákr, Jón or Guðmundr is not mentioned in the saga. Although this looks like a miracle, it may also be a true account of how Laurentius got his name, since Icelandic children were normally named after a relative rather than a saint.⁴⁶

A second hagiographic-style dream—a miracle of the Virgin—comes later in the same saga. Laurentius has knocked a piece off a statue of

⁴¹ James F. Loughlin, 'St Ambrose', *The Catholic Encyclopedia* <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01383c.htm>> [accessed 14 June, 2006].

⁴² On the other hand, according to Turville-Petre, the version of the *Life* of St Ambrose known to the author of *Guðmundar saga* is not the one in *Heilagra Manna Sögur*, and so it is possible that the author of *Guðmundar* may have known the story of the prefect's unconscious prophecy. See *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, 1953), p. 135.

⁴³ *BS*, III, p. 3.

⁴⁴ The motif of dreams sent to saints' pregnant mothers is very common; for examples, see Grant Loomis, *White Magic: an Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend* (Cambridge, MA, 1948), pp. 17–18.

⁴⁵ *BS*, III, p. 4.

⁴⁶ According to Cormack, this is the 'only recorded description of an Icelandic child being named after a saint' (*Saints in Iceland*), p. 45.

the Virgin. After being threatened with a beating, the boy falls on his knees in prayer in front of the statue. The next day he is spared the beating because the Virgin Mary appears to Reverend Þórarinn in a dream to ask for forgiveness for him.⁴⁷

Childhood Portents in the Bishops' Sagas

As well as being, with the exception of Guðmundr, types of the 'sinless child', the Bishops of Hólar also belong to the type of the child marked by a portent. What is particularly interesting is the way in which the childhood portents come in threes: before birth, at birth, and in childhood for Jón and Laurentius; and at birth, in childhood, and in young adulthood (twenty-one years of age) for Guðmundr. In *Laurentius saga*, the three portents are further emphasised by all being linked to Reverend Þórarinn: Laurentius' mother sees him in her pre-birth dream; he is present at Laurentius' birth; the Virgin appears to him in a dream. As for Guðmundr, there are two possible reasons why the pre-birth portent has been replaced by one in early adulthood in his case: one is that his mother was living in sin with his father and therefore not worthy of divine revelation; the other is that there was no pre-birth prophecy in *Ambrosius saga*.

Having episodes occur three times is a salient feature of Old Icelandic literature.⁴⁸ In both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Grettis saga*, it takes three attempts before the ghosts of Þórólfr bægifótr and Glámr are finally laid.⁴⁹ In *Kormáks saga*, Kormákr, who has been cursed by a witch, rejects the woman he is in love with three times. Threes even appear outside the realm of the supernatural: in *Grænlandinga saga*, Bjarni's men

⁴⁷ BS, III, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Having episodes occur in threes is a literary device of some antiquity, for it is found in both the folk-tale and epic poetry. In Old Icelandic literature, L. Alfred Bock counted 475 *Dreihetsfalle* (cases of threeness). See 'Die epische Dreizahl in den Islendinga sögur,' *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 37 (1921), 263–313; 38 (1922), 51–83. For a discussion of threes in individual sagas, see Joaquín Martínez-Pizarro, 'The Three Meals in *Heiðarviga saga*: Repetition and Functional Diversity', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, 1968), pp. 220–34. See also A. Margaret Arent Madelung, *The Laxdæla Saga: its Structural Patterns*, (Chapel Hill, 1972), pp. 97–118.

⁴⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslensk fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), pp. 1–184 (pp. 92, 95, 170); *Grettis saga Asmundarsonar*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík, 1936), pp. 1–290 (p. 112).

Table 1. Childhood portents.

	<i>Pre-birth</i>	<i>Birth</i>	<i>Childhood</i>	<i>Young adulthood</i>
Jón	prophecy by king	prophecy by wise man	prophecy by queen	
Guðmundr		prophecy by wise man	game foretells future	unconscious prophecy
Laurentius	mother's dream	revives after vow	miracle of Virgin in dream	

want to land three times in the New World.⁵⁰ Jóreið's dream-woman in the purportedly historical *Sturlunga saga* even makes the following remark after she has appeared to Jóreið for the third time: *Nu hefir þetta þrisvar borit fyrir þik, enda verður þrisvar allt forðum, þat er ok eigi síðr, at góðr er guðs þrenning*.⁵¹ The dream-woman's remark suggests that the native tendency to arrange episodes in threes has been further reinforced by the Church's teaching of the Trinity. Providing each of the future Bishops of Hólar with three portents is, therefore, the reflection of a well attested structural device in the native literature, which, because of its connection with the Trinity, may have been thought particularly appropriate for candidates for sainthood.

A Reflection of Native or Foreign Models?

To what extent then does the description of the birth and childhood of the early Icelandic bishops reflect the native Icelandic saga-tradition, and to what extent the European hagiographic tradition?

The *vitae* from Skálholt conform to a historical rather than a hagiographical model. The life of Þorlákr, Iceland's first saint, owes very little to the European hagiographical tradition. Details of the holy man's early life seem to have been scarce, and his biographer, like an Icelandic saga-writer, has not tried to fill them in. Þorlákr's precociousness and the genealogical introduction, short though it is, belong to the native

⁵⁰ *Grænlandinga saga* in *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 244–69 (pp. 246–47).

⁵¹ *Sturlunga Saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), I, p. 521: 'Now this has happened to you three times, for all good things come in threes, and God's Trinity is no less good'.

tradition, while the saintly and scholarly aspects of the boy's character are more typical of hagiography.

Jóns saga shows more strongly than *Þorláks saga* the influence of the Continental tradition.⁵² For medieval hagiographers, religious truth was of more importance than literal truth. If details of a saint's life were missing, the gaps were filled by incidents from the Bible or from the lives of other, similar saints.⁵³ The prophecies at the royal courts, inspired as they are by the Bible, belong to this tradition, but the details of the portents, the visit to the court itself and the prophecy by a wise man or wise woman, are taken from the native tradition.

The origin of certain aspects of Guðmundr's childhood is unclear. The author of the early version of his life goes to the trouble of emphasising that the saga is trustworthy, having been composed by good and reliable men who were contemporaries of Guðmundr's and so could be relied upon to have known about the events of the saga.⁵⁴ This same biographer does not seem to be embarrassed to report that Guðmundr behaved more like a saga-child than a saint. On the other hand, the prophecy at birth is clearly copied from *Ambrosius saga*, and the childhood games could be fictitious too, inspired once again by *Ambrosius saga*.⁵⁵ Yet the third 'portent', Guðmundr's preference for chatting with his fellow-clerks rather than going to the church-service, does fit the young cleric's character.

The late *Laurentius saga* is by far the most 'European' of the *vitae*.⁵⁶ The traditional prophecies of the saga-tradition are replaced by Continental-style dreams and miracles, and no attempt is made to combine

⁵² Marlene Ciklamini suggests that the increased interest in childhood predictions of sanctity in the lives of the other bishops has arisen out of a twelfth-century stricture that childhood and adolescence were to be given more emphasis in *vitae*. See 'Sainthood in the Making: The Arduous Path of Guðmundr the Good, Iceland's Uncanonized Saint', *Abtissmál*, 11 (2004), 55–74 (p. 60).

⁵³ 'Legends were transferred by analogy: that which was once true is, given similar presuppositions, true today': Alison Goddard Elliot, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover & London, 1987), p. 9.

⁵⁴ Stefán Karlsson, 'Guðmundr Sögur Biskups: Authorial Viewpoints and Methods', in *The Sixth International Saga Conference: Workshop Papers*, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1985), II, p. 993.

⁵⁵ The general assumption, however, is that the account of childhood games is true; the coincidental similarity between Guðmundr's behaviour and Ambrose's was noticed later on. See Ciklamini, 'Sainthood in the Making', p. 60.

⁵⁶ From a stylistic point of view, too, religious writing becomes more Latinate from the mid-thirteenth to the fifteenth century as clerics adopt what is referred to as the 'florid' style.

these dreams with Icelandic-style motifs. Even the description of the miracle at Laurentius's birth, which may be based on actual events, has no Icelandic colouring to it. In short, the further we advance in time, the more 'European' the bishops' sagas become.

It seems, therefore, that when it came to describing the childhood of their home-grown saints, Icelandic clerics moved towards the Continental format. The clerics who recorded the lives of the Bishops of Skálholt treated childhood with the same brevity as the writers of *Íslendingasögur*. In Hólar, on the other hand, clerics tended more towards the European hagiographic tradition. These Icelandic writers, like their Continental counterparts, tried to show that their subjects' sanctity was obvious from an early age. However, just as secular saga-writers tried to make episodes occur in threes in their works, Icelandic hagiographers provided their saints with not one but three portents of future holiness. If facts about their protagonists' lives were missing, the biographers 'borrowed' details from the Bible or from other saints' lives, as was frequently done in Continental hagiography, while adding a little native colouring. The author of the latest *vita*, *Laurentius saga*, used solely Continental motifs. So perhaps Turville-Petre's oft-cited remark—'the learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it'⁵⁷—may not be altogether correct where the childhood of Icelandic bishops is concerned: when it came to depicting a person's early years, Icelanders already knew 'how to say it'; the clerics of Hólar just felt that the native way of saying it was inappropriate for saintly bishops.

⁵⁷ *Origins*, p. 142.

‘SVEINN EINN UNGR FELL Í SÝRUKER’:
MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC CHILDREN IN VERNACULAR
MIRACLE STORIES

Joanna A. Skórzewska

Sagas about the Icelandic holy bishops and miracle books provide examples which contribute to the image of Icelandic children and the portrayal of society’s attitude towards them from a perspective different from that known from contemporary sagas or Icelandic family sagas. Researchers who study hagiographical material usually focus on the depiction of the main characters as children.¹ Those cases, however interesting, have a slightly different function than the miracle stories included in the *vítæ* or extant as separate collections. As Barbara Hanawalt has observed, saints’ childhoods were not necessarily representative of ordinary experience, and their relationships with their mothers and fathers were not the most usual.² All across Europe the important role played by children in the miracle material is in itself a significant fact which distinguishes this category from almost all other types of medieval sources and also reveals some information about the esteem in which children were held.³ Even though the focus on the saint’s glory is still the aim of those narratives, the reader can get at least a glimpse of everyday lives of poorer families.

Not many publications have been devoted to children as beneficiaries of the Icelandic miracle stories.⁴ This paper examines the cases listed in

¹ See, for instance, the article by Bernardine McCreech in the present volume.

² Barbara A. Hanawalt, ‘Medievalists and the Study of Childhood’, *Speculum*, 77 (2002), 440–60 (p. 446).

³ Christian Krötzel, ‘Parent–Child Relations in Medieval Scandinavia According to Scandinavian Miracle Collections’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 14 (1989), 21–37 (p. 25). The positive attitude towards children in medieval Iceland has been demonstrated by a number of scholars, e.g. Helgi Þorláksson, ‘Óvelkomin börn’, *Saga*, 24 (1986), 79–120; and the contributors to the volume *Miðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2005).

⁴ They have been occasionally mentioned, e.g., by Else Mundal ‘Children, Parents and Society as Reflected in Old Norse Sources’, *Nordica Bergensia* 27 (2002), 175–91 (p. 176); and Helgi Þorláksson ‘Óvelkomin börn’, p. 116. A very thorough examination of children as the beneficiaries of miracles in Scandinavia has been made by Krötzel, ‘Parent–Child Relations’, also included in Diana Whaley, ‘Miracles in the Sagas of

the sagas and miracle books concerning the three Icelandic holy bishops: Jón Ögmundarson (1052–1121), Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1133–1193) and Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237). Þorlákr was the bishop of the southern diocese of Skálholt in the years 1178–93. He became the first native saint when the general assembly issued the permission in 1198 to call on him for intercession. On 20 July 1198 his body was translated to the cathedral of Skálholt, and the following year his feast was declared a Holy Day of Obligation. Jón was the bishop of Hólar 1106–21. The northern clergy decided for the *elevatio* of his bones in 1198 and a formal *translatio* in 1200 in order to promote a northern bishop as a saint. The veneration of that saint did not gain much popularity, and the *cultus* of another bishop of Hólar, Guðmundr Arason (1203–1237), was orchestrated more carefully. His relics were translated in 1315 and as many as six narratives were composed about that bishop, four of which postdate the *translatio*. Nevertheless, Guðmundr's *cultus* does not seem to have been as widespread as that of Þorlákr either and the stories examined in this paper confirm it.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the portrayal of the saintly interference in everyday lives of medieval Icelandic children and their families as depicted in the miracle stories. The issues under examination are age and gender of the beneficiaries, nature of the cases (illnesses and accidents), means used by the intercessors (relics and other objects as well as prayers, vows and votive offerings) and the way the saints themselves intervened in particular cases. The issues of pregnancy, birth and infancy are excluded from this study as they are rather complex, and it would be outside the scope of this paper to examine all aspects of childhood. Hence, the paper focuses on children who could move around the household on their own and were not entirely dependent on adults. That, however, does not change the fact that their young age made them still very vulnerable. I would argue that each of the sources under consideration reveals authorial interest in the very concept of childhood and portrays children as human beings who were too fragile to be entirely independent and old enough to understand difficult situations or feel anxiety. They were old enough to help in the household but not entirely without supervision or assistance, and independent enough to keep busy, but not always able to judge the circumstances or find a

Bishops: Icelandic Variations on an International Theme', *Collegium Medievale*, 2 (1994), 155–80.

way back home. It was the vulnerability of the children that seems to have occupied the authors of the Icelandic miracle stories.

The Time Span and Sources under Consideration

The sources can be dated, approximately, to 1200–1350. As far as Þorlákr is concerned, the dates of the composition of the *A*, *B* and *C* variants of the *vita* are difficult to determine. All the redactions contain accounts of miracles which date from 1198 to the first quarter of the fourteenth century. The contents of the miracle books I and II can also be placed in the same span of time and all the miracle stories concerning children are posthumous and post-translatory.⁵

The miracles attributed to Jón are also all posthumous. The oldest redaction of *Jóns saga* was written most probably after the translation of his relics in 1200 and the younger redactions are dated to the fourteenth century.⁶ Guðmundr's miracles are different from those attributed to Jón or Þorlákr in that the majority of them are *in vita* miracles and, supposedly, took place in the years 1203–1237 when he was the bishop of Hólar. A few miracles concerning children belong to that category and are recorded in *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, contemporary saga and the first saga concerning Guðmundr, composed in 1240s.⁷ *GA* and *GB* are dated to, approximately, 1320s, and *GD* to 1350s/60s.⁸ A

⁵ *Þorláks saga byskups in elzta (Þorláks saga A)* in *Biskupa sögur* II (hereafter *BS* II), ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 16 (Reykjavík, 2002), pp. 47–99 (hereafter *ÞA*); *Þorláks saga byskups yngri (Þorláks saga B)* in *BS* II, pp. 143–224 (hereafter *ÞB*); *Þorláks saga byskups C* in *BS* II, pp. 253–85 (hereafter *ÞC*); *Þorláks saga byskups E* in *BS* II, pp. 289–94 (hereafter *ÞE*); *Jarteinabók Þorláks byskups in forna (Jarteinabók I)* in *BS* II, pp. 103–40 (hereafter *ÞJtb I*); *Jarteinabók Þorláks byskups önnur (Jarteinabók II)* in *BS* II, pp. 227–50 (hereafter *ÞJtb II*). For a detailed discussion of all the variants of *Þorláks saga* and the miracle books see Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Þorláks saga helga' in *BS* II, pp. xxxi–cxxxiv.

⁶ Peter Foote, 'Jóns saga helga' in *Biskupa sögur* I (hereafter *BS* I), ed. by Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Peter Foote, 2 parts, Íslenzk fornrit, 15 (Reykjavík, 2003), I, pp. ccxii–cccxi; *Jóns saga íns helga* in *BS* I, II, pp. 175–316 (hereafter *JŠ*).

⁷ *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða in Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbo-gason and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), I, pp. 116–59 (hereafter *GP*); *Jarteinabók Guðmundar byskups in Byskupa sögur*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslendingasagnaútgáfan and Haukadalsútgáfan, 3 vols (Reykjavík, 1981), II, pp. 437–93 (hereafter *GJtb*).

⁸ *Ævi Guðmundar biskups (Guðmundar saga A)* in *Guðmundar sögur biskups*, ed. by Stefán Karlsson, Editiones Arnarnæ, B 6. (Copenhagen, 1983) (hereafter *GA*); *Guðmundar saga B* [unpublished edition, prepared by Stefán Karlsson] (hereafter *GB*); *Saga Guðmundar Arasonar, Hólabiskups, eftir Arngrím ábóta (Guðmundar saga D)* in *Biskupa sögur*, ed. by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Sigurðsson, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1858–1878), II, 1–220 (hereafter *GD*). The narratives concerning Guðmundr are discussed e.g. in

miracle book was most probably composed as a supplement to Sturla Þórðarsson's *Íslendinga saga* and later incorporated into the fourteenth-century variants. Neither the authors of Guðmundr's nor Þorlákr's miracle collections are known.

Medieval miracle books served different purposes.⁹ The stories of miracles at shrines were rarely copied and usually existed in books kept at shrines, or, at most, in a few copies made for particular purposes. By the end of the twelfth century the miracles of newly deceased saints were more often recorded in the form of legal briefs for the purpose of applying for official canonization. The *vitae* of the saints were sometimes followed by selections of posthumous miracles that served in a general way the same purpose as the canonization miracle collections: proving the sanctity of the miracle worker. The main difference between miracles recorded in a hagiographical context and those recorded in a canonization process lied in the formality of the procedure. The first was an appeal to the listener or reader to recognize the sanctity by the signs of its action, while the second was a collection of evidence sent to professional judges. It is uncertain where Þorlákr's and Guðmundr's miracle books were kept or for how long they were regarded as separate documents, not miracle collections that followed the saga variants. However, it may be assumed that they belong to the first category of miracle books.

The Importance of the 'Healing Centre'

In the Scandinavian miracle collections the nature of shrines as faith-healing centres is clearly demonstrated.¹⁰ In the Icelandic material, on the other hand, only in four cases healings happened at the shrine of a saint (Þorlákr), otherwise all miracles took place within some distance from the graves/shrines. The journeys to the see of Hólar¹¹ and

Stefán Karlsson, 'Guðmundar sögur biskups: Authorial Viewpoints and Methods', in *Stafkrókar. Ritgerðir eftir Stefán Karlsson gefnar út í tilnefni af sjötugsafmæli hans 2. desember 1998*, ed. by Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson (Reykjavík, 1998), pp. 153–71. I have not included *Guðmundar saga C* in my research. This variant has not been published so far and the interpretation of the manuscript contents is difficult (among others because of the fact that the leaves are not very well preserved).

⁹ The information here has been supplied from Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000–1215* (Aldershot, 1987), pp. 175–84.

¹⁰ Krötzl, 'Parent–Child Relations', pp. 33–34, discusses the role of Vadstena.

¹¹ *JS*, ch. 28, *GD*, ch. 83.

Skálholt¹² are a few times vowed by one of the parents or the children themselves. In a few cases the context reveals that the family went to one of the sees to show the cured child and to make sure that the story would be recorded.¹³

Like in many European countries, after arrival with the child at a centre of pilgrimage certain rituals were performed, such as staying awake throughout the night (*vigilia*) or having a healing sleep (*incubatio*). Þorlákr's *Miracle Book II* contains a story about a girl whose limbs were crippled so badly that she was not able to walk. Since her parents had abandoned her, she was taken to Skálholt, to Þorlákr's grave, by a male relative who pitied her. They spent one night by the shrine and on the following morning the child was cured.¹⁴ The main idea in such situation was to get as close as possible to the relics and the use of *beinavatn* ('bone water'), that is, the water in which a saint's relics had been washed, was also practiced.¹⁵ In the Icelandic material *beinavatn* is applied quite a few times to cure pain in a boy's calf,¹⁶ injury from a knife,¹⁷ unidentified sickness which led to insomnia and pain in the eyes,¹⁸ tumour,¹⁹ pain and swelling in a hand²⁰ and a *vatnormr*.²¹ In all those cases the water replaced the closeness of a shrine. It provided the suppliants with a substitute of the saint's presence.

Typical fourteenth- and fifteenth-century European collections contain miracles that happened not at or in the vicinity of the shrine, but sometimes even far removed from any relics.²² The visit at a shrine would

¹² *ÞC*, chs 112, 115, 117, 118 and 132.

¹³ *JS*, ch. 47 mentions telling at Hólar about the cure; *ÞB*, chs 137–138 contains the following comment: *en viku síðarr náðu menn at sjá hana í Skálholtii heila ok styrka með vitnisburði réttorðra manna um hennar vanheilsu* ('and a week later people saw her at Skálholt, looking healthy and strong, and truthful men testified how ill she used to be'). See also *ÞB*, ch. 139 and *ÞC* ch. 109.

¹⁴ *ÞJtb II*, ch. 142: *en um morguninn snemma tók on alheilsu sína* ('and early in the morning she regained her health'). *ÞA*, ch. 82 contains stories about a boy who was cured of epilepsy and a girl whose crippled feet were healed by Þorlákr's shrine.

¹⁵ Krötzl, 'Parent–Child Relations', p. 33.

¹⁶ *ÞC*, ch. 109.

¹⁷ *ÞC*, chs 112 and 125.

¹⁸ *JS*, ch. 21.

¹⁹ *JS*, ch. 22.

²⁰ *JS*, ch. 28.

²¹ *GD*, ch. 83. I have not found a good explanation of this word so far. The author must have meant some type of insect living in still water.

²² See, for example, André Vauchez, *La sainteté en occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge* (Rome, 1981), p. 550 or Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage c. 700–c. 1500* (Basingstoke and New York, 2002), pp. 52–56.

often be included in the vows or performed as a result of a miracle to thank the saint for it. Many stories of that kind concerned children being delivered from illnesses and accidents from which children 'all too often suffered'.²³ Also the Icelandic miracle stories seem to fit that pattern. The earliest examples, those attributed to Þorlákr, contain the biggest number of cases (four) in which the saint's grave was treated as the healing centre. The tales concerning Jón and Guðmundr are different not only because they are slightly later, but also because the saintly fame of the two northern bishops developed in a different way. The practical side of Jón's *cultus* does not seem to have evolved much directly after his death.²⁴ Guðmundr Arason, Jón's holy follower at Hólar, was the one who supposedly initiated writing Jón's *vita* and *miracula*.²⁵ However, as the narratives concerning him claim, Guðmundr often carried relics with him while travelling around the country during his ministry (1185–1203).²⁶ It is impossible to give a precise account of what kind of relics they were and how many of those precious objects were given away by him. However, there are passages in both the sagas concerning Guðmundr and *Jóns saga* which suggest that Jón Ögmundarson's bones were indeed among Guðmundr's possessions. One detailed story, dated to 1201, mentions that he decided to give some of Jón's relics to Chieftain Sigurðr Ormsson and a priest named Steinn.²⁷ In *Jóns saga* the story about Monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson's student who had a grave unidentified illness is a similar example.²⁸ The boy asked for Bishop Jón's relics which he had received from Priest Guðmundr and some

²³ Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage*, p. 58.

²⁴ Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland. Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400* (Brussels, 1994), pp. 115–17. No churches were dedicated to him before 1400 and only two owned his images. Jón is referred to as *hinn helgi* or *sanctus* in the annals, but otherwise written evidence does not support the assumption that the veneration of that saint was widespread.

²⁵ *JS*, chs 24, 34, 61 and 63. He was also reportedly involved in Þorlákr's *cultus*. The Miracle Book mentions *vitránir þær, er Guðmundr prestur, er síðan var biskup, sendi Gunnlaugi múnk* ('the revelations which Priest Guðmundr, who later became bishop, sent to Monk Gunnlaugr': *Þjtb II*, ch. 20). The person mentioned here was Gunnlaugr Leifsson, see below.

²⁶ *GB*, ch. 32: *samnaði sér helgum dómum hvar sem hann fekk ok hafði þá iafnan með sér hverrt sem hann fór; ok bar yfir sívka menn* ('he collected all the relics which he had received/was able to acquire and carried them wherever he went; and held above the sick'. See also *GP*, ch. 11; *GA*, ch. 25; *GB*, ch. 22.

²⁷ *GP*, ch. 22; *GA*, ch. 91; *GB*, ch. 64; *JS*, ch. 61.

²⁸ *JS*, ch. 46.

consecrated water. The relics were dipped in the water and the boy drank it, which resulted in almost immediate recovery.²⁹

However, Jón's *fama sanctitatis* did not evolve dynamically during Guðmundr's episcopacy and no evidence for his use of Jón's relics in the years 1203–37 is recorded. The meaning of Hólar as the centre of pilgrimage did not have the chance to develop since Guðmundr's conflicts with laymen made him spend long period of time outside the episcopal see.³⁰ Besides, Guðmundr's own saintliness was largely based on his use of consecrated water which allegedly gained holy properties thanks to his blessings. The wells, springs and rivers which he consecrated were located all over the country, but predominant in the northern and western quarters.³¹ Thus, despite a few recorded cases of miracles which occurred due to the use of Guðmundr's *beinavatn* or due to the vow of visiting Hólar, the real healing centres, as the narratives suggest, were the landmarks consecrated by him. This concept would also fit the general European trend of the 'long distance miracles' which developed from the thirteenth century onwards. Guðmundr's *cultus* as such is another issue, it might not have been as widespread and intense as the narratives suggest and that is why his grave is not frequently depicted in the texts as the centre of worship.

The Age and Identity of the Beneficiaries

It has been suggested that medieval miracle stories are more likely to give the ages of children than do other sources and tend to be precise.³² The age of the beneficiaries in the material under consideration is not always given, usually just the expressions *barn* 'child', *sveinn* 'boy',

²⁹ *Þá beiddisk hann at tekinn væri heilagur dómrinn Jóns byskups, er Guðmundr prestur hafði miðlat honum, ok látinn koma í vígt vatn ok vildi hann drekka þar af.*

³⁰ 1214–8 (in Norway), 1218–21, 1221–6 (1222–6 in Norway), after the general assembly in 1227 he traveled around the Western as well as the Northern Quarter and stayed at Hólar for some time (it is difficult to say for how long, possibly until 1230), but in 1231 he had to leave again. He died at Hólar and was buried with honours, as the narratives claim. It is, however, difficult to say precisely how many years before his death Guðmundr spent there.

³¹ This is just a very general assumption as few place names are mentioned by the saga authors. There have been attempts to do a thorough survey of the holy wells, e.g. by Ólafur Lárusson, but his research is based to a large extent on much later material from the folk tales: Ólafur Lárusson, 'Guðmundur góði í þjóðtrú Íslendinga', *Skirnir* (1942), 113–39.

³² Hanawalt, 'Medievalists and the Study of Childhood', p. 447.

mær 'girl', *ungsveinn* 'young boy', or *meystelpa* 'young girl' are used. Only a few stories mention the age more precisely, and it can be assumed that the youngest child was three years old and the oldest one fourteen years old. In the legal material the expressions *barn* 'child', *frumvaxti* 'prime of life', *karl* 'man', *maðr* 'man', *sveinn* 'boy', *mær* 'girl', *meystelpa* 'young girl' were among those used to describe individuals from birth to that age limit.³³ The categories are, however, rather imprecise: *sveinn* referred to a male individual of five to twenty. The laws are, however, normative sources and it must be considered that experience as well as individual achievements counted as much, if sometimes not more, than biological age.

In the miracles attributed to Þorlákr and Guðmundr boys are predominant, and in some cases only the words 'child' or 'children' are mentioned. In the seven tales from the saga about Jón that involve children, girls are predominant. Only in one case is a boy, the student and relative of Monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson, the beneficiary of a miracle. Hardly anything more is known about those children or their family background, although it might be assumed that they did not come from the most prominent families, like the majority of the beneficiaries portrayed in the narratives examined here.³⁴ In one of the miracle stories attributed to Þorlákr, the chieftain and deacon Teitr Oddsson is mentioned as an advisor.³⁵ The incident took place at Breiðabólstaður/Fljótshlíð, an estate of importance, which might indicate high social status of the boy suffering from injury. *Jóns saga* lists a case when the bone water was applied to a girl's eyes 'as Bishop Brandr had advised'.³⁶ This comment may, however, be interpreted in two ways: that the bishop was involved in the case or that he had made a general announcement that the water was a remedy which should be used in difficult cases.

³³ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Börn og gamalmenni' in *Yfir Íslandsála: Afmælisrit til heiðurs Magnúsi Stefánssyni sextugum 25. desember 1991*, ed. by Gunnar Karlsson and Helgi Þorláksson (Reykjavík: Sögufræðslusjóður, 1991), 111–30, pp. 112–16.

³⁴ Only in the case of a girl named Arnriðr who had a boil (tumour) in her breast is it mentioned that her father was a good doctor (*JS*, ch. 22). In a few cases, priests in the family are mentioned: father (*PB*, ch. 139; *Pjtb II*, chs 134, 149–170; *Gjtb*, ch. 15), stepfather (*Pjtb I*, ch. 36; *PB*, ch. 122), paternal uncle (*PC*, ch. 112) or maternal uncle (*PC*, ch. 115). Nevertheless, the majority of the intercessors are farmers.

³⁵ *PC*, ch. 66: *Þar var við staddir Teitr djákn, vitr maðr. At hans ráði var heitit á inn sæla Þorlák byskup, sveininum til heilsubótar.*

³⁶ *JS*, ch. 21: *Þá var tekit vatnit þetta út sama sem höfuðbeinin heilags Jóns byskups höfðu verið þvegin í, at ráði Brands byskups, ok dreypt á augu meyjunn.*

As the tables show, very few personal names or names have been listed, in a few cases only the comment that the beneficiary or her/his family were poor. Again, it must be underlined that the vulnerability of the children and the helplessness of the adults are in focus in those stories. The intervention of the saints is depicted as the last resort to which the suppliants were able to turn.

The Typology of the Miracles

Of the miracles which Ronald Finucane has included in his study of late medieval European miracle stories, seventy-four per cent involved sickness, and twenty-six per cent accidents.³⁷ He has also observed that children from 0 to 2 years experienced the miracles at home, so did nearly forty per cent of children 9–12 years old. The majority of older children experienced miracles outside the home.³⁸ In general, the approximate number of cures in the Icelandic sources under consideration is nearly equal to that of accidents. Furthermore, no mental or infectious diseases are reported, save for one case of pestilence. All the sicknesses are sudden and only two of them seem to have been chronic.³⁹ Only one Icelandic example—that of a girl with crippled limbs who was cured overnight by Þorlákr's shrine—lists a congenital illness. An interesting difference between Scandinavian miracle collections and the Icelandic stories is the fact that in Scandinavia parents are said to have consulted folk healers in connection with long-term illnesses.⁴⁰ Doctors and even Franciscan friars were consulted as well.⁴¹ The Icelandic narratives provide no such examples.

³⁷ Ronald C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents. Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York, 1997).

³⁸ Finucane, *Rescue of the Innocents*, pp. 163–64. Finucane found that in southern Europe miracle tales, miracles curing children of illnesses were far more common than they were in northern Europe. He suggested that the greater density of urban population and the presence of such diseases as malaria probably contributed to the greater morbidity among southern children. The study examines many interesting issues and contains convincing arguments, but it is not entirely clear which countries are classified by him as 'northern Europe' (England is mentioned quite frequently in this context).

³⁹ *JS*, ch. 21; *BC*, ch. 115 describes a complex case of epilepsy which seems to have lasted very long.

⁴⁰ Krötzl, 'Parent–Child Relations', p. 32.

⁴¹ Krötzl, 'Parent–Child Relations', p. 33.

The predominant type of a fourteenth-century European miracle which involved children as beneficiaries was a rescue miracle (specifically, rescue from accidents).⁴² The Icelandic material shows a similar regularity: beside the cases when children fell into the tub of sour whey or a fireplace, the knife injuries also were the result of a fall.⁴³ In the sources under consideration the principle about the domestic context seems to be followed, although, as mentioned above, the exact age of the children is hardly ever given, and therefore it is difficult to establish any precise patterns.⁴⁴ As previously mentioned, the context is not always clear and the circumstances are frequently not given.⁴⁵ A slight difference dictated by the time of composition can be observed: the earlier sources concerning Þorlákr give very brief descriptions of the accidents and focus on the results. The later ones are more elaborate. The same can be said about the few cases of miraculous help attributed to Guðmundr.

Krötzl has observed that in the Scandinavian miracle collections, children are considerably more often involved in accidents than adults and suffered from the same types of illnesses as the adults did.⁴⁶ The same can be said about the Icelandic stories, although the ratio of accidents to illnesses which affected children may be different in particular sources. For example, *Jóns saga* lists only illnesses such as eye sickness (unspecified),⁴⁷ a boil/tumour in one breast,⁴⁸ crippled limbs,⁴⁹ pain in the hand,⁵⁰ unspecified grave illness,⁵¹ crippled feet and dysentery.⁵²

The sources concerning Þorlákr are rich in illnesses and accidents, but also include cases that could be described as resulting from the

⁴² Michael E. Goodich, *Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century. Private Grief and Public Salvation* (Chicago, 1995), p. 84.

⁴³ Three boys fell as they were cleaning fish, and a girl had a knife in her pocket.

⁴⁴ Similarly to the examples from the Scandinavian miracle stories (Krötzl, 'Parent-Child Relations', pp. 26–28). The exclusion of babies from the survey, however, limits the group of beneficiaries to children who are able to move on their own around the household and play or even help their family at work.

⁴⁵ It is, for instance, stated that a young boy fell into a tub with sour whey (*ÞA*; *Þjtb* I, ch. 7; *ÞB*, chs 99–103) or that a girl fell down and injured her leg (*Þjtb* I, ch. 24), but it is not said under what circumstances it happened.

⁴⁶ Krötzl, 'Parent-Child Relations', p. 26.

⁴⁷ Ch. 21.

⁴⁸ Ch. 22.

⁴⁹ Ch. 28.

⁵⁰ Ch. 37.

⁵¹ Ch. 46.

⁵² Ch. 47.

negligence or carelessness of the parents. As an example of the latter category, one of the stories tells about children who faced the danger of fire spreading in the house while all the adults were absent.⁵³ It is, however, difficult to say anything about the reason why the children were left alone. One must not exclude the possibility that their parents (or other adults who took care of them) had no other option but to leave the children on their own.⁵⁴ The situation of the boy who was sent to look for the lost cattle and could not find his way in a thick fog seems to have been different.⁵⁵ Perhaps it had been his task to watch the cattle and the adults considered him capable of finding the animals, although the decision might have been caused by carelessness. Another interesting story tells of a boy who was sent to the house of his biological father for the first time. When he arrived, the wife of that man was not willing to let the child in and so the boy was left alone in difficult weather conditions in an unknown place.⁵⁶ Regardless of reasons, all the stories mentioned above ended well due to the mercy of Saint Þorlákr, but also thanks to the prayers of the children and/or their parents. Those who participated in the upbringing of children also offered spiritual aid, which is especially noticeable in the case of the boy sent to the house of his biological father: the priest who had raised the child prayed for him.

According to Diana Whaley's survey, children constituted the biggest group (24%) of suppliants in healing miracles attributed to Þorlákr.⁵⁷ The illnesses mentioned are: eye sickness,⁵⁸ epilepsy,⁵⁹ bronchitis,⁶⁰ pestilence (*fársótt*),⁶¹ swollen throat,⁶² and crippled limbs.⁶³ The accidents listed in the sources concerning Þorlákr involve cases of children who

⁵³ *ÞA*, chs 65–71; *ÞB*, chs 134–135.

⁵⁴ A similar situation is described in *Þǵtb II*, chs 242–44. A man named Auðunn left his little son at home. Those who were supposed to take care of the boy waited till he fell asleep and then left as well. The father was very distressed when he returned and saw that his little son had disappeared. He was found in a sewer, unconscious. Prayers and the promise of a candle restored his consciousness.

⁵⁵ *ÞB*, chs 53–66.

⁵⁶ *Þǵtb I*, ch. 36; *ÞB*, ch. 122.

⁵⁷ Whaley, 'Miracles in the Sagas of Bishops', p. 175.

⁵⁸ *ÞA*, chs 33–35; *ÞB*, chs 53–66.

⁵⁹ *ÞA*, ch. 82; *ÞC* ch. 115.

⁶⁰ *ÞC*, ch. 117.

⁶¹ *ÞA*, chs 65–71; *ÞB*, chs 124–31; *ÞE*, chs 62–69.

⁶² *ÞC*, ch. 118.

⁶³ *ÞA*, ch. 82; *Þǵtb II*, ch. 142.

received lethal wounds by falling on a knife,⁶⁴ burned their hands,⁶⁵ or fell into a tub with sour whey.⁶⁶ Some fell into a sewer,⁶⁷ others were almost hanged on a bridle while playing in a stable.⁶⁸ There are also stories about children who were attacked by a bull,⁶⁹ had swallowed a nail,⁷⁰ suffered from leg and foot injuries,⁷¹ or had a fishbone stuck in the throat.⁷² The number of accidents is rather exceptional in the narratives concerning Þorlákr and contains stories comparable to those found on the continent.

The majority of Guðmundr's miracles for children are *in vita* miracles, from the time when he was a priest and a bishop. Guðmundr protected children from evil spirits,⁷³ saved them from starvation and freezing to death.⁷⁴ During his priesthood he provided the sons of Þorgils Gunnsteinsson with breeze good for sailing.⁷⁵ It is interesting to observe that three stories included in the narratives concerning Guðmundr are the 'chastisement' stories. The first can hardly be called a miracle, it is rather a tale that demonstrates Guðmundr's prophetic abilities. As he visited Galtardalstunga during his episcopacy, a boy ran towards him and asked for some new clothes saying that he had nothing to wear.⁷⁶ However, the bishop 'knew' that the boy had hidden his old clothes and wished to receive some new ones. Guðmundr reprimanded the child, but decided to give him twelve ells of the homespun cloth.

One of the posthumous stories reports curing a girl of a *vatnormr* which she managed to swallow while drinking some water.⁷⁷ The girl was punished for having forgotten to cross herself before she had her meal as the apparition of Guðmundr himself explained to her at night. A similar function had the story that reported bringing a dead boy

⁶⁴ *BB*, chs 141–44; *Þjtb II*, chs 138, 149–70; *BC*, chs 112, 125.

⁶⁵ *PA*, chs 56–64; *Þjtb I*, ch. 21.

⁶⁶ *PA*, chs 56–64; *Þjtb I*, ch. 7; *PB*, chs 99–103.

⁶⁷ *Þjtb II*, chs 149–70.

⁶⁸ *Þjtb II*, chs 149–70.

⁶⁹ *Þjtb II*, chs 149–70.

⁷⁰ *BC*, ch. 119.

⁷¹ See, for example, *Þjtb I*, ch. 24.

⁷² *BB*, chs 149–70.

⁷³ *Gjtb*, ch. 15.

⁷⁴ *GA*, ch. 22; *GD*, ch. 16.

⁷⁵ *GP*, ch. 18; *GA*, ch. 80; *GB*, ch. 53; *GD*, ch. 16.

⁷⁶ *Gjtb*, ch. 16; *GB*, ch. 133.

⁷⁷ *GD*, ch. 83.

back to life.⁷⁸ Priest Ljótr Refsson from Árnes at Strandir in Trékyllisvík publicly called all the tales of the bishop's consecrations lies and nonsense at a meeting at Árnes where the issue was discussed. Shortly afterwards, one of his sons, Kálfr, drowned. When the people who had previously attended the meeting heard about it, they persuaded the priest to pray to Guðmundr Arason for help. Some water, consecrated by the holy bishop, was poured into the boy's mouth and he began to breathe again.⁷⁹ The story is quite significant as the father of the boy was a clergyman. His skepticism towards Guðmundr's miraculous abilities was so unacceptable that it had to be punished.

In general, the case types in the Icelandic miracle stories are not surprising as the stories described in the narratives refer to the playfulness and clumsiness that is characteristic of children. Like in nearly all the Scandinavian miracle collections information can be found on children at play and examples that prove their early integration into the working life.⁸⁰ It is, however, interesting to see the discrepancies between the sources concerning each of the saints, which I find difficult to explain. The relation between gender of the beneficiaries and miracle type has been discussed by Finucane on the basis of his research.⁸¹ He has observed that, according to the records, girls were especially prone to long-term illnesses and that the boys were much more often involved in accidents. Nothing in the narratives suggests that Jón Ögmundarson was exceptionally skilled at curing children or that young female suppliants would be especially privileged. It is possible that the number of curative miracles involving girls is either a coincidence or a conscious attempt of the northern clergy to have a native saint who would take special care of a particular social group.

The Means and the Methods to Achieve the Goal

Could the 'price' of a miracle be estimated on the basis of the sources under consideration? Offering prayers or fasting on water was the most common means to achieve the goal. The water in which Jón's relics

⁷⁸ The cases of resurrection in the Icelandic miracle collections are, however, not always obvious. The description of the child's state often suggests a temporary coma or concussion: Whaley, 'Miracles in the Sagas of Bishops', p. 173.

⁷⁹ *G7tb*, ch. 25; *GB*, ch. 139; *GD*, ch. 89.

⁸⁰ Goodich, *Violence and Miracle*, pp. 26–27.

⁸¹ Finucane, *Rescue of the Innocents*, pp. 95–99, 141–49, 158–63.

have been washed seems to be the most popular remedy, it was either applied to the sick part of a child's body⁸² or drank, also with milk.⁸³ To heal a girl named Hildibjörg who had a hand injury, the cloth in which Jón's relics had been dried after the translation (which involved the ritual washing of them) was used. The girl's father wrapped her sick hand in it, which is an interesting and rare example of secondary relics in the Icelandic context.

In the *B* variant of *Þorláks saga* a slightly bigger variety of means other than prayer is presented: to help the boy named Bjarni, both parents offered prayers and material gifts (*söngum ok fegjöfum*), but the desired effect did not occur. Only five nights later the apparition of a man in black gown whom the mother saw, suggested the use of 'Bishop Þorlákr's oil' (*smýrsl Þorláks biskups*) which, according to the father's (who was a priest) interpretation, was oil consecrated by the bishop.⁸⁴ This story is not the only example of the saint's direct intervention, *Þjfb I* presents the case of a girl who injured her leg in a bad fall. Moved by her own and other people's prayers, Þorlákr came to her in a dream and stroked her foot and in the morning the girl woke up cured. Another story tells about a girl who survived in a snow shelter thanks to *maðr í kanokabúningi* ('a man in canonical gown') who visited her there and gave her sweet bread, thanks to which she did not feel hungry or cold and stayed safe till people found her.⁸⁵

The biggest number of the cases of direct intervention, however, has been attributed to Guðmundr. Since the majority of his miracles for children are *in vita* miracles, it was the saint's direct presence, blessings and prayers that prevented possible misfortunes from happening rather than dealing with their results. The means used by the worried parents were persuasion and water previously consecrated by the bishop and in the posthumous miracle stories, prayers and vows were offered. The

⁸² *JS*, chs 21, 37.

⁸³ *JS*, chs 22, 46.

⁸⁴ Margaret Cormack suggests that it must have been oil 'produced from his relics at the cathedral rather than oil he himself had blessed' since all the miracles which mention it all occur after 1198 (Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland*, p. 62). However, I think that both possibilities should be taken into consideration here. Bishops used consecrated oil in various rituals and sacraments such as confirmation, and if any oil or chrism (consecrated mixture of oil and balm) which had previously been consecrated by Þorlákr was left after his death, it might have been distributed among the faithful as a relic.

⁸⁵ *ÞE*, chs 62–69.

only story which could serve as an example of a direct posthumous intervention here is that of swallowing a *vatnormr*.

The value of the offerings varied, no standards which would regulate the value of votive gifts seem to have existed.⁸⁶ As far as Jón's miracles are concerned, the offerings mentioned are a candle to heal the pain in the eyes and two candles to heal a boil/tumour in a child's breast.⁸⁷ In Þorlákr's case, *B* is the first variant of the saint's *vita* to mention offerings: a boy who had fallen on a knife and received a lethal wound was saved, among others, with six ells of *vaðmál* ('homespun cloth').⁸⁸ In *C*, on the other hand (a similar case), a wax candle and twelve ells were vowed for the boy who fell on a knife. Bronchitis was healed with (among others) a mark of wax and a throat disease with two *aurar* of wax and the vow to annually feed the poor. As far as the stories in sources on Guðmundr are concerned, only the girl suffering from *vatnormr* was cured with the help of additional means (*eyri söluvoðar*), otherwise prayers were the only 'price'.

The votive offerings for Þorlákr are noticeably richer than those for Jón and Guðmundr. That does not necessarily mean that the suppliants who turned to him were richer or had bigger demands than those who called on Jón or Guðmundr. The social status of the faithful is difficult to establish, but, in general, the stories mention average or poor people. The main reason might be the spread of that saint's *cultus*, much wider than the veneration of the northern saints. The bigger percentage of incidents means a bigger percentage of gifts. Besides, as previously mentioned, half of Guðmundr's miracles were *in vita* and no votive offerings were promised or given to him in those cases.

Intercessors

Medieval miracle stories afford some of the best evidence of the emotional attachments that parents of all social classes had to their children

⁸⁶ The problem has been discussed in Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland*, pp. 53, 57–59.

⁸⁷ In the latter case the length of one candle was measured against the height of the girl, while the other one, around her waist.

⁸⁸ *Vaðmál* was measured the following way: *alín* (c. 49 cm), *eyrir* (6 *álnir*), *mörk* (8 *aurar*, 48 *álnir*), and the units for measuring wax were: *eyrir* (c. 27 g) and *mörk* (8 *aurar*, c. 214 g).

and of their outpouring of grief for the loss of these children.⁸⁹ It has been suggested that the parents of the north European peasantry adopted a much more different attitude towards their children than did southern European parents.⁹⁰ The Scandinavian miracle stories examined by Krötzl reveal a very positive attitude of the parents.⁹¹ They openly expressed their grief and often used very elaborate and time-consuming methods in order to regain their children's health or life. Neither fathers nor mothers would hesitate to spend their time or energy to achieve the goal.

In the miracle stories from *biskupa sögur*, parents, relatives and neighbours are very much involved in saving children from unfortunate events or death. The predominance of mothers among the intercessors such as that observed by Finucane in the miracle collections examined by him is non-existent in the Icelandic material. Neither are any of the fathers accused of being 'too womanly' while despairing in a difficult situation.⁹² On the other hand, none of the stories mentions excessive laments or overwhelming grief which would cause very unnaturally emotional behaviour of the parents or relatives. Except for a few cases which suggest carelessness or negligence of the adults, the Icelandic miracle stories reveal very positive and caring attitudes towards children. There are four miracle stories in which children left on their own are the only ones who pray for help. In a few cases the people who made vows or prayed on behalf of the children are not mentioned at all, only the fact that somebody has done that or that 'people' prayed for the child. Otherwise there are cases of mothers as well as fathers, and often both parents, offering prayers or votive gifts in order to obtain help. In the stories on Jón of Hólar, the involvement of both parents is quite common. In the sources on Guðmundr, only one of the parents (possibly single parents) are mentioned as intercessors.

The *vitae* and miracle books of Bishop Þorlákr are a similar case, with the exception of *C* variant where the stories are very interesting because of a bigger variety of intercessors, both secular and religious, relatives and others. One of the stories describes an interesting case of a shepherd who fell ill and the *bóndi* he worked for who prayed for

⁸⁹ Hanawalt, 'Medievalists and the Study of Childhood', p. 454.

⁹⁰ Krötzl, 'Parent-Child Relationships', p. 22, n. 9.

⁹¹ Krötzl, 'Parent-Child Relationships', pp. 30-35.

⁹² Many fathers depicted in European miracle stories were, in fact, criticized for such behaviour: Finucane, *Rescue of the Innocents*, pp. 151-58.

him.⁹³ One day Hallr, farmer Snæbjörn's shepherd, suddenly lost his ability to speak and, shortly afterwards, became unconscious. Snæbjörn prayed to St Blase and promised that if the saint cured Hallr, the boy would go to Breiðholt and offer some cod liver oil to (most probably) the local church. There was, however, no improvement, so then the farmer prayed to Þorlákr and promised to go to Skálholt on Þorlákr's Day as well as fast on water on its eve and give an ounce of wax to the church. Hallr saw two men in black robes who told him that his health would be restored in the name of God and the Virgin Mary. The shepherd guessed they were Blase and Þorlákr, and that Þorlákr was the one who blessed him. The boy woke up cured.

The material reflects ideas circulating in other European countries where the sharp drop in population and life expectancy influenced the attitude towards infancy.⁹⁴ The miracles for children in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries constituted a substantial proportion of those cited in papal bulls, which suggests that concern for the welfare of children had become public policy. Nearly all the cases noted by Pope John XXII in the 1320 canonization of Thomas of Hereford, for example, deal with children; and a majority with childhood accidents. It is interesting to observe that despite certain differences as far as the nature of the sources is concerned (none of the Icelandic holy bishops was ever canonized by any medieval pope), the Icelandic miracle stories reveal a similar attitude towards children.

Conclusion

In accordance with the principles of hagiography, the Icelandic miracle stories focus on the devotion of the parents to their children and their trust in the power of the saints. Contrary to the Icelandic family sagas and the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, they provide examples of unconditional parental love and care that are immediately recognisable to a modern reader. These stories draw the reader's/listener's attention to the disadvantaged whose young age and vulnerability seem to have been the issue which concerned the authors most. The variety and complexity of the cases shows the authorial interest in everyday situations which

⁹³ *ÞC*, ch. 132.

⁹⁴ In the period 1250–1360 as much as about 3.5 to about 1.9 children per family: Goodich, *Violence and Miracle*, p. 84.

children encountered. All the examples discussed here prove that the responsibility of adults for the youngest members of the households as well as a willingness to sacrifice much in order to keep children alive and in good condition were not unknown ideas in medieval Iceland.

The miracles for children constitute only a small percentage of the sources concerning Jón Ögmundarson and Guðmundr Arason, and do not seem to have any decisive influence on the image of either of them.⁹⁵ It cannot be stated with certainty that any of the Icelandic saints specialised in helping children or healing illnesses/results of accidents. Nevertheless, the fact that the authors considered such stories necessary (or at least proper) in this material, should be considered positive. They contribute to the general image of the Icelandic society known from other types of sources with a few interesting aspects and make it more complex and varied.

⁹⁵ The difference between North and South seems to be rather clear as far as the hagiographic tradition is concerned. The lives of the Bishops of Skálholt, according to Bernardine McCreesh, seem to follow a native pattern also known from *Íslendingasögur*, while the lives of the Bishops of Hólar are more inspired by the European hagiographic tradition (see the present volume, the last section of the article). The examples discussed above, however, do not support this theory and the differences should rather be attributed to the typology of the sainthood.

Þorlákr Þórhallsson

Illnesses

beneficiary	age	case	time	place	means	time/place of recovery	intercessors
boy		pain in the eyes			a candle measured around the boy's head, prayers	immediate	mother
boy		pestilence			prayers	immediate	both parents
boy		epilepsy	Þorlákr's translation			immediate at Skálholt, by the newly translated relics	
girl		crippled limbs	Þorlákr's translation			immediate at Skálholt, by the newly translated relics	
girl	13	little bone growth			prayers and fasting	one week	'those who took care of her'
boy		withered foot			'with prayers and offerings'/oil consecrated by Þorlákr	short period of time	parents
girl		crippled limbs	Þorlákr's translation		prayers	one night at Skálholt, by the shrine	male relative

Table (cont.)

Illnesses						
beneficiary	age	case	time	place	means	time/place of recovery intercessors
boy		pain in one calf		Hofstaðir in Reykholtisdalur/Reykjadalur nyrðri	Þorlákr's bone water	short period of time relatives
boy	12	epilepsy	Good Friday	Hítarnes	pilgrimage to Skálholt	a short while uncle
boy		swollen throat	Easter	Ferjubakki at Mýrar	pilgrimage to Skálholt, a mark of wax, fasting on water the night before Þorlákr's Feast in the summer	the length of a service (at Skálholt, by the shrine) mother
boy	14	swollen throat	Sunday night	Stangarholt at Mýrar	prayers, food for the poor, two <i>auror</i> of wax	three days father
boy			1325	Bústaðir	prayers to St. Blase, promise of visiting Breiðholt and offering cod liver oil/prayers to God and Þorlákr, promise of a pilgrimage to Skálholt, one <i>eyrir</i> of wax	one night farmer (employer)

Accidents

beneficiary	age	case	time	place	means	time/place of recovery	intercessors
boy		fell into a fireplace			prayers	three nights	both parents
boy		fell into a tub of sour whey			prayers	almost immediate	both parents
“children”		left in a house on fire		West Fjords	prayers	immediate	one of them
girl		injured one leg		Reykholt in Borgarfjörður	prayers	the following morning	herself
boy		left in an unknown place		Arnarbæli by Eyjafjöll	prayers	immediate	mother and stepfather
boy		lost in a thick fog			prayers	immediate	himself
boy		injured with a knife			prayers, six <i>átnir</i> of <i>væðmál</i>	a few nights	father
boy		injured with a knife	Easter	in Vör	prayers	one night	both parents
girl	7	a fishbone got stuck in her throat	Þorlákr’s feast		prayers	immediate	
boy		left on his own, found unconscious			prayers, candles	a short while	father
girl		hanged on a horse bridle		Egg in Hegranes	prayers, offerings	a long while	father

Table (cont.)

Accidents							
beneficiary	age	case	time	place	means	time/place of recovery	intercessors
boy		kicked by a horse	St. James' Feast	Breiðabólstaður, Fljótshlíð	prayers	immediate	(advice) Teitr Oddsson
boy	3	injured with a knife		West Fjords	prayers, wax candle, twelve <i>álmir</i> , pilgrimage to Skálholt/ Þorlák's water	one week	mother, paternal uncle
boy		swallowed a nail		at Ýzta-Reyðarvatn	prayers	one week	both parents
girl		injured with a knife		Bollastaðir in Blöndudalur	mass for the soul of Bishop Árni, <i>Pater Noster</i> / Þorlák's water	three nights	both parents
girl		left in a snow storm			prayer	immediate	herself

Jón Ögmundarson

beneficiary	age	case	time	place	means	time/place of recovery	intercessors
girl		long unidentified sickness, insomnia which caused pain in the eyes	December 1189 (right after the translation?)		Jón's bonewater	three days and three nights	Bishop Brandr (advice)
girl		tumour	1199		prayers (fifty <i>Pater Nosters</i> and <i>Ave Marias</i>), two candles/Jón's bone water	three days	both parents
girl	7	crippled limbs	Easter (c. 9. April 1200)		fifty <i>Pater Nosters</i> each Saturday till Jón's Feast, a pilgrimage to Hólar with two candles, girl: seven <i>Pater Nosters</i> each day for a week	a few weeks	mother
girl		pain and swelling in one hand	1200? (right after the translation?)		prayers to Jón and Þorlákr, Jón's bone water and cloth	immediate	herself and her father
boy		unidentified grave illness	1200		Jón's relics, consecrated water	a few nights	himself

Table (cont.)

Jón Ögmundarson							
beneficiary	age	case	time	place	means	time/place of recovery	intercessors
girl		crippled feet	1200		150 <i>Pater Nosters</i> and <i>Ave Marias</i> , “Pater in manus tuas . . .” after each 10	a few days	father
Guðmundr Arason							
beneficiary	age	case	time	place	means	time/place of recovery	intercessors
“children”		haunted mountain		Firði at Skálarnes	consecration (<i>in vita</i>)		father
“children”		hunger			blessing? (<i>in vita</i>)		mother
girl		snow storm			Guðmundr’s cloak (<i>in vita</i>)		
girl		<i>vahnorr</i>	1343	West Fjords	prayers, a pilgrimage to Hólar with one <i>eyrir</i> of <i>sölvöðar</i>	one night	herself, mother
boy		drowning		Árnes at Strandir in Trékyllisvík	prayer, vow to observe Guðmundr’s Feast, water consecrated by Guðmundr	immediate	father

TEENAGE ANGST: THE STRUCTURES AND BOUNDARIES OF ADOLESCENCE IN TWELFTH- AND THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ICELAND

Nic Percivall

In 1242, Hrafn Oddsson was sixteen years old, an adolescent by modern standards. During this year of his life, Hrafn was approached by Þórðr *kakali* Sighvatsson, who asked Hrafn to join his contingent on an expedition to attack a rival chieftain. Hrafn refused. What is interesting from the point of view of this paper is the form that his refusal took. He did not deny the validity of Þórðr's claim to his allegiance, which included both a matter of vengeance and a kin connection to one of Þórðr's allies, but called into doubt his own maturity instead. Hrafn told Þórðr that he was young (*vera ungr*), unused to expeditions (*litt til ferða fallinn*), that he had never been on an expedition with a chieftain before (*hefi ek eigi í ferðum verit með höfðingjum hér til*), and he cast doubt upon his having the necessary strength to take part in such an enterprise, given that he had only just left childhood behind (*eigi víta, hvárt hann myndi harðnaðr vera nokkut, þar er hann var lítt kominn af barnsaldri*).¹ At sixteen, an age generally associated today with strenuous attempts by teenagers to convince parents and other sceptics of their complete competence to run their own lives, Hrafn seemed determined to define himself as virtually a child, deficient in strength, experience and ability. Modern teenagers would probably feel that he was letting the side down somewhat. This episode occurs in *Þórðar saga Kakala* (part of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation), probably written in the late thirteenth century, about events which took place in mid-thirteenth-century Iceland.²

¹ *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson et al., 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), II, p. 10 (hereafter *SS*).

² Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. by P. Foote (Reykjavík, 1997), p. 198. Jónas argues for Sturla Þórðarson's death in the 1280s as the *terminus ad quem* for this saga. Sturla's own work, *Íslendinga saga*, forms the major part of the early fourteenth-century *Sturlunga saga* compilation to which *Þórðar saga Kakala* also belongs. *Íslendinga saga* avoids mention of key events occurring during the 1250s, which suggests that, although Sturla Þórðarson's immediate family were closely concerned, he may have felt that *Þórðar saga Kakala* sufficiently covered their careers, and that to add to that in his own work would constitute unnecessary repetition.

This passage dealing with Hrafn's refusal to act on the basis of his youth ends with the terse statement—*Hrafn var þá sextán vetra* ('Hrafn was then sixteen winters').

It raises questions about how thirteenth-century Icelanders defined male childhood and male adulthood, and whether they recognised an intermediate life-stage such as adolescence. If so, did the stage have finite boundaries with qualifying entry and exit criteria, and if it did not, how did young male Icelanders become adult in this period? Þórðr *kakali*'s request prompts us to question whether it was reasonable for him to expect to receive support from the sixteen-year-old Hrafn. Was Hrafn justified in his use of an argument claiming proximity to childhood to avoid accommodating Þórðr? Hrafn appears to have defined maturity in terms of experience, and particularly physical maturity as expressed through prowess in arms. However, was this the only—or indeed the most compelling—determinant of male adulthood in the period? Did arms alone make the man? Finally, how are we to interpret the saga writer's explicit inclusion of Hrafn's age in his account of the exchange? What conclusions would a near contemporary saga audience of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century have drawn from an awareness of Hrafn's age at the time of the incident? If we are to understand the significance of this information, the episode needs to be assessed in the context of the medieval Icelandic elite society about which and for which the contemporary sagas were written.

There are a number of ways of seeking some of these answers from the saga literature of thirteenth-century Iceland. In this volume Carolynne Larrington has analysed family and legendary sagas for the ways the writers viewed the stage of transition from child to adult using a psychological perspective. Here I shall compare the legal expressions of the attainment of maturity with the statements to be found in the contemporary sagas, taking as my starting point adolescence as an anthropological concept. Anthropologists have studied the ways in which different cultures define the stages encountered throughout the life-cycle. Henderson Stewart explained, in his anthropological study of age-group systems in 1977, that societies need to develop mechanisms to effect the transition of duties and rights between each age-group in order that age-appropriate activities are allocated among all age-groups.³ Bernardi argued that notions such as childhood, adolescence and youth

³ F. Henderson Stewart, *Fundamentals of Age-Group Systems* (London, 1977), p. 129.

are vague, and that indicators which denote membership of these groups are often imprecise.⁴ While it may appear that the simplest solution is the arrangement of clear chronological structures, anthropologists are agreed that many cultures rely on promotion to the next age-group through complex structural models based on social activities rather than physiological age alone.⁵ Bernardi defines this approach as an 'initiation' system, involving the 'social birth into full personhood'.⁶

The medieval world was not unfamiliar with concepts of life-cycle stages. To take just one example, Isidore of Seville presented a theory of six distinct phases in the life of a man, *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *iuventus*, *gravitas* and *senectus*.⁷ According to Isidore, *infantia* accounted for the first seven years of life and after that came *pueritia* which ended at fourteen. *Adolescentia* was a period of life from fourteen to twenty eight; *iuventus* described a man until his fiftieth year; *gravitas* was an age of decline from fifty to seventy and *senectus* had no fixed length, but was characterised by descent into decrepitude. Isidore's definitions of the stages one could expect to experience in life were just one of many such schedules devised by thinkers throughout the Middle Ages.⁸ These authorities propounded the theories that there were three, four, six, or even seven 'ages' during which men underwent transition from childhood through very prolonged stages of youth to complex divisions of maturity and into old age.

The varied interpretations of adolescence reflect the problems that both medieval and modern scholars encounter when attempting to define the line between childhood and adulthood. It is important to rid ourselves of modern constructs of 'adolescence' and 'youth'. In this instance, the intention is to explore the structures and boundaries of the period of transition during which a twelfth- or thirteenth-century Icelandic male attained the characteristics associated with male adulthood. I have preferred to use this concept of 'transition to adulthood'

⁴ B. Bernardi, *Age Class Systems: Social Institutions and Politics Based on Age* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 2.

⁵ Bernardi, *Age Class Systems*, p. 8; Henderson Stewart, *Fundamentals*, p. 204; D. Kerzter and J. Keith, *Age and Anthropological Theory* (Ithaca, NY, 1984), p. 99.

⁶ Bernardi, *Age Class Systems*, p. 5.

⁷ Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, *Etymologiarum Sive Originum*, ed. by W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911), XI, ii.

⁸ J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), has produced a thorough discussion of these schedules and the ideas that shaped them.

to unlock this life-cycle period in medieval Iceland without becoming entangled in modern notions of chronological age. It was during this life-stage that markers of transition to adulthood were attained. Yet what were these criteria? When, and in what circumstances, did the achievement of one or all of these signify that adulthood had been reached? Bernardi explains that, while in some societies the transition from one status to another is institutionalised by formal rites of passage, other cultures imply legitimisation of that transition through particular social actions, such as juridical roles, marriage, or ownership of a means of production.⁹ Anthropological theory therefore suggests that administration of the laws, marriage and property were prominent in defining entry into adulthood. Historians also single out these key areas for attention,¹⁰ and have argued for other markers of the successful transition from male child to male adult in the medieval period such as prowess in arms,¹¹ public affirmation,¹² and control over others.¹³ In this way a number of key elements to completing an

⁹ B. Bernardi, *Age Class Systems*, pp. 4, 7–8: ‘the age of an individual is not measured in relation to the stages of his or her physiological development, but in relation to the social activities that are consigned to the individual’.

¹⁰ For instance, R. Mazo Karras, ‘Young Knights under the Feminine Gaze’, in *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society 1150–1650*, ed. by K. Eisenbichler (Toronto, 2002), pp. 189–205 (p. 189), includes marriage and property in her list of markers of maturity; L.I. Hansen, ‘Slektskap, eiendom og sociale strategier i nordisk middelalder’, *Collegium Medievale*, 2 (1994), 103–54 (105–07); R. Samson, ‘*Goðar*: democrats or despots?’, in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex, 1992), pp. 167–88 (p. 173); and J. Martindale, ‘Succession and Politics in the Romance Speaking World, c. 1000–1140’, in *England and her Neighbours 1066–1453*, ed. by M. Jones and M. Vale (London, 1989), pp. 19–41 (p. 23), all stress the importance of landholding; while G. Duby, ‘Youth in Aristocratic Society’, in *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. by C. Postan (London, 1977), pp. 112–22 (p. 112) and S. Mooers Christelow, ‘The Division of Inheritance and the Provision of Non-Inheriting Offspring Among the Anglo-Norman Elite’, *Medieval Prosopography*, 17, 2 (1996), 3–44 (p. 7), both define marriage and landholding as key to achieving male adulthood; J.L. Byock, ‘Inheritance and ambition in *Eyrbyggja saga*’, in *Sagas of the Icelanders. A Book of Essays*, ed. by J. Tucker (New York, 1989), pp. 185–205 (p. 186) and Samson, ‘*Goðar*’, p. 182, both express the belief that able performance at the law courts was also an essential part of establishing one’s credentials in medieval Iceland.

¹¹ Mazo Karras, ‘Young Knights’ makes a connection to prowess in arms; however both Duby ‘Youth’ p. 112, and Mooers Christelow, ‘The Division of Inheritance’ p. 7, argue against martial skill as a significant life-cycle marker.

¹² W.M. Aird, ‘Frustrated Masculinity: The Relationship between William the Conqueror and his Eldest Son’, in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. by D. Hadley (London, 1999), pp. 39–55 (p. 44), links ‘access to power’, an ‘independent household’ and ‘public recognition’.

¹³ T. Ditz, ‘The New Men’s History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power. Some Remedies from Early American Gender History’, *Gender and History*, 16, 1 (2004),

adult identity have emerged. Adulthood, it seems, could be attained through the acquisition of property, juridical authority, marriage, and physical or martial prowess, all of which, either together or severally, led to self-determination by an individual and public recognition of his new status.¹⁴ The psychological necessity of receiving recognition and the importance of self-recognition in this context is also explored by Larrington.

Above all, these determining features of maturity are gendered, in that they refer to male adulthood. Hadley noted that masculinities were 'constructed, reconstructed and challenged; they were also situational constructs, created through social interaction'.¹⁵ Gardiner has also emphasized that masculinities were subject to change in many ways, including life-cycle changes.¹⁶ This reflects the anthropological argument put forward by Kerzter and Keith that performance and recognition were key to the movement between age-groups.¹⁷ The question of how medieval men expressed their masculinity is, therefore, central to understanding the ways in which they defined the progression to male adulthood and the specific actions or objects which, through their performance or attainment, completed this transitional stage of their lives. Hrafn's self-definition as a 'child' should be examined in the context of what twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic society considered the defining principles of adult masculinity.

Attempting to arrive at an answer to these questions involves turning to the sources which provide arguably the most detailed and self-conscious accounts of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, i.e., the legal statements and the contemporary sagas.¹⁸ This paper will use the contemporary sagas as the point of comparison rather than the more

1–35 (p. 12), emphasizes control over others as key to the attainment of power and thereby dominant adult masculinity.

¹⁴ Aird, 'Frustrated Masculinity', p. 44, suggests that independence of action was the 'prime indicator' of achieved manhood.

¹⁵ D.M. Hadley, 'Introduction', in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. by D.M. Hadley (London, 1999) pp. 1–18 (p. 2).

¹⁶ J. Gardiner, 'Introduction', in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. by J. Gardiner (New York, 2002), pp. 1–29 (p. 14): 'gender forms through power relationships that are mobile and both temporally and site specific'.

¹⁷ Kerzter and Keith, *Age*, p. 99.

¹⁸ *Grágás. Íslendernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Biblioteks Haandskrift*, 2 parts, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1879; reprinted Odense, 1974) and *Grágás. Efter det Arnarnagðænske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1879; reprinted Odense, 1974); *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson et al., 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946).

well known family or legendary sagas. Much important work has been done, and is being done, with these texts to broaden the ways in which we can use saga literature. They are being used to answer questions about life-cycle, gender, family relationships and other relationships in the thirteenth century, but the contemporary sagas remain something of a wall-flower. Yet these sagas have much to offer, not least as a point of comparison with the family and legendary sagas. Jochens has noted that the family sagas and the contemporary sagas offer very different images of predominant marital customs, and this paper will also discuss Callow's analysis of the transition to adulthood in his comparison of the laws and the family sagas.¹⁹ It appears that there remains much to be done with regard to bringing the contemporary sagas into the discussion of saga literature in general. That is a task not attempted by this paper, which has the more modest aspiration of using a discussion of the legal and contemporary sources in a social and cultural context to raise questions for further debate.

Comparison of these two sources is intended to examine the ways in which legal and social structures provided a framework upon which an adult male identity could be constructed by men in the chieftain class. To build up a picture of what medieval Icelanders understood about this significant life-stage, it is important to question how Icelandic laws codified the elements which made up the transition from child to adult, and whether the legal statements match the portrayal of adolescence in Iceland, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, found in the contemporary sagas. *Grágás*, the collection of Icelandic legal statements, was first written down at the beginning of the twelfth century.²⁰ However, there is no indication that *Grágás* was ever consulted as an authority at the Alþingi. Rather it was the continued function of the Lawspeaker to recite the laws at this assembly, even up to the end of the Commonwealth. This leaves open the question of the exact function of the legal text. That it was intended for use in a legal context is witnessed by the text itself, which makes provision for the existence of inconsistencies between the copies of the text, and stipulates which one should take

¹⁹ J. Jochens, 'The Church and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland', *Journal of Medieval History*, 6 (1980), 377–89; C. Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society' in *Children, Childhood and Society*, ed. by S. Crawford and G. Shepherd (Oxford, 2007), pp. 45–55.

²⁰ A. Dennis, P. Foote and R. Perkins, 'Introduction', in *Grágás, Laws of Early Iceland*, 1, trans. and ed. by A. Dennis, P. Foote and R. Perkins (Winnipeg, 1980), pp. 1–19 (p. 4).

precedence in a dispute.²¹ But there are no instances that I have found in the contemporary sagas, or other sagas, which demonstrate that the text was being produced at key legal proceedings. The intent in its composition appears to have been as a book of legal learning, to guide the work of the legal practitioner by considering responses to real or hypothetical cases and by doing so to create a body of learning about the ways that Icelandic society functioned. It represents the efforts of individuals to record the laws of their society. The writing of the laws coincided with the beginning of an era of considerable productivity in Icelandic literary and historical composition which culminated in saga production.²²

The contemporary sagas, or *samtíðarsögur*, are a compilation of nine sagas also known as *Sturlunga saga*. The compiler, working in the early fourteenth century, appears to have intended to create a historical narrative of recent history in Iceland, resulting in a chronicle of Icelandic history between 1117 and 1264. The sagas earn their appellation as contemporary in that their composition appears to have been by individuals who were either witness to, or writing within a generation or two of, the events they describe.²³ This creates obvious advantages and disadvantages as a source.²⁴ For instance, the author of the longest by far of the sagas in the compilation, *Íslendinga saga*, was Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84), a scion of the Sturlunga family who dominated Icelandic politics in the first half of the thirteenth century.²⁵ He is generally considered to be a reliable and measured historian.²⁶ However Sturla's

²¹ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 118.

²² Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 22.

²³ In this way the contemporary sagas differ from the more celebrated groups of sagas such as the family sagas or the *fornaldarsögur* which purport to describe the distant or legendary past, although there are good arguments to support their use as sources for thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic thought too; for instance P. Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Den norrøne litteratur og virkeligheden', *Collegium Medievale*, 2 (1989), 135–46 (p. 143), argues that it can be read for insights into social institutions, concepts and ideologies while remaining cautious about its claims to historical veracity; Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', pp. 45, 48, agrees that the sagas can offer much in the way of answers on social constructs in the period if addressed with their narrative purpose kept in mind.

²⁴ Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, p. 33, discusses the problems of the source and balances this against the contemporary audience's reception of the work which he suggests would have tempered inaccuracies.

²⁵ *SS*, I, p. 115; II, p. 236.

²⁶ P. Hallberg, 'Sturlunga saga', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by P. Pulsiano (London, 1993), pp. 616–18 (p. 616); Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York, 1957), p. 155.

close connection to events necessitates careful evaluation of the text, its intended audience and his motivations for undertaking its composition. While historians do not agree on the nature or intentions of the authors of the sagas (it has been described as a political history written by the winners, as a genealogical tool, or as a literary construct), most generally accept that as a document of social and cultural norms it offers a valuable insight into the practices and structures that would have been recognisable to and validated by a contemporary Icelandic audience.²⁷ With these issues in mind it is possible to use these sources in conjunction with each other to compare the ways in which medieval Icelanders defined their society and their individual identities within it from both the legal and the cultural perspective.

The Legal Statements

Grágás recognizes most of the criteria identified by anthropologists and historians as key to making the transition to adulthood, such as ownership of property, administration of justice and the laws, physical maturity and responsibility for one's actions. But the source remains silent on the subject of when in the male life-cycle marriage or other forms of legitimate relationships with women became permissible. At first it appears that the Icelanders used a physiological age-group system rather than a structural one, in that *Grágás* includes a number of clear statements governing when Icelandic male childhood ended and adulthood began. The text frequently assigns sixteen as a key age for Icelandic men.²⁸

²⁷ Gúðrun Nordal, 'The Contemporary Sagas and their Social Context', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by M. Clunies Ross (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 221–41 (pp. 222, 231), and Gúðrun Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense, 1998), p. 22, argues that it is a construct of the Icelandic elite but one which nevertheless suggests a 'historical reality'; Úlfar Bragason, 'The Politics of Genealogies in *Sturlunga saga*', in *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350, Contact, Conflict and Coexistence*, ed. by J. Adams and K. Holman, trans. by A. Yates (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 309–21 (pp. 320–21), and Úlfar Bragason, 'Sturlunga saga: Textar og Rannsóknir', in *Skáldskaparmál* (Reykjavík, 1992), 176–206, describe this source in terms of 'the politics of genealogies' interpreting it as a document intended to legitimise lineages; a view also shared by S. Tranter, *Sturlunga Saga; the Role of the Creative Compiler* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1987), p. 15, who calls for the text to receive attention as a literary source in order to re-evaluate its use as a historical one, believing that the use of literary motifs can give as much insight into the contemporary society portrayed therein as a historical approach.

²⁸ In total there are twenty-four separate statements in the texts where sixteen is specifically cited as a qualifying age; *Grágás*, Ia, pp. 17 (two statements), 129, 161,

This is evident from the fact that it was often the age at which the responsibilities of kin, foster-parent or a legal administrator, towards maintenance and representation of behalf of the child, ceased.²⁹ That an Icelandic male was considered a 'man' at the age of sixteen is further supported by the many laws which refer to his rights to property. Sixteen was the age at which a youth could claim his inheritance,³⁰ and begin to administer the property of others.³¹ It was also the age at which he attained the right of self-determination. For example, prior to this age, in order that he might later enter the Church, his legal administrator arranged for his training with a priest.³² Similarly, this was the age at which he could decide where to live, an issue which would have been decided for him up to that point.³³ Moreover a sixteen-year-old could participate in the arrangement of his widowed mother's betrothal and remarriage.³⁴ This constituted a significant reversal of the child and adult relationship in a legal sense.

It would appear from these examples that Hrafn Oddsson's claim to have just left childhood behind was vindicated by the Icelandic laws. Yet on closer study, there are elements of ambiguity concerning these statements about this transitional phase in the Icelandic male life-cycle. Childhood appears to have been specifically defined in the laws only by default, as the period before which certain key rights were assigned. Before the age of sixteen, one could not hold property, have care of others, or even make any decisions about where, and with whom, one was going to live each year. However, in a number of important areas, Icelandic youths were already burdened by some significant rights and responsibilities well before they reached the age of sixteen. Twelve was a very significant milestone birthday for a male Icelfander, and it could be argued that this was when an Icelandic male began to leave childhood behind. A twelve-year-old male was considered physically mature, in that his labour was counted as a 'man's' in legal terms.³⁵ Moreover, a twelve-year-old could be judged sufficiently mature to commit, prosecute,

167–68, 168–69, 169 (two statements), 221, 222–23, 223, 225, 225–26, 230–31, 234; Ib, pp. 7 (two statements), 22, 23, 29, 48, 76, 203 (two statements).

²⁹ *Grágás*, Ia, pp. 17, 161, 222–23, 225–26, 234; Ib, pp. 7, 22, 23.

³⁰ *Grágás*, Ia, pp. 225–26.

³¹ *Grágás*, Ia, pp. 225–26, 230–31.

³² *Grágás*, Ia, p. 17.

³³ *Grágás*, Ia, p. 129.

³⁴ *Grágás*, Ib, pp. 29, 203.

³⁵ *Grágás*, Ia, p. 159.

or even judge a capital crime.³⁶ Legally, any physical harm caused by a male over the age of twelve was something for which he could be held fully accountable in the courts.³⁷ A twelve-year-old could, potentially, be judged capable of taking up the inherited office of chieftain, if there was agreement that he should do so, although the source does not specify in any detail which persons should take part in this decision.³⁸ A chieftaincy was the highest level of secular authority in Iceland at the time, yet a youth would have had to wait four years for the right to ownership of any property which accompanied this inheritance. The evidence presented thus far would suggest that in most areas the legal statements left men facing a period of staged transition from child to adult between the ages of twelve and sixteen, with the latter forming the end point of the process. While describing a more complex structure, the statements create a zone of transition between twelve and sixteen which continues to present a chronological framework.

However, closer reading of the legal statements present a number of caveats attached to the age of sixteen as the age at which the transition to the adult world was complete. For example, inheritance at sixteen was only possible if it was agreed that a young man was mentally capable of managing his property *til fullz eiris*, 'to the last unit'.³⁹ If there was doubt about his competence to manage his property, his rights to take part in the arrangement of his mother's marriage and to prosecute in cases of serious crime, such as murder, were called into question.⁴⁰ A judgement on a young man's fitness to inherit was not considered final until the age of twenty, until which time he was given opportunities to alter men's opinion of his abilities.⁴¹ There was another unusual caveat which might affect an Icelander's ability to function as a fully adult male at sixteen, which again suggests the significance of the age of twenty. If a young man's father died when he was sixteen or more, he was considered fully able to administer his own property, and that of others. However, if the young man had lost his father before the age of sixteen, he would have the right to manage his own property at sixteen, as before, but the right to administer the property of others

³⁶ Grágás, Ia, pp. 38, 166, 168.

³⁷ Grágás, Ia, p. 166.

³⁸ Grágás, Ia, p. 142.

³⁹ Grágás, Ia, pp. 222–23.

⁴⁰ Grágás, Ib, p. 29; Ia, p. 167 respectively.

⁴¹ Grágás, Ia, pp. 222–23.

would be withheld until he reached the age of twenty.⁴² A young man with claims upon land or property which was not asserted, or may have been poorly managed, by his legal administrator while he was still a child, also had a breathing space of four years, after reaching sixteen, during which to bring his claim before the courts.⁴³ It becomes clear that the Icelanders built a cushion of four years into the selection of sixteen as the final age of competence. This is clearly evident in matters relating to property. It would seem that the Icelanders were concerned that youths might struggle to successfully make the transition from child to adult at twelve or even sixteen. Therefore, they recognised a period during which young men could continue to grow in maturity and ability, a period of 'trial run', as it were, when childhood was to some extent ended, but before finally being judged fully adult, and thus fully answerable, by their peers. They built into their laws a staged entry to adulthood which allowed each young man a little leeway, by stretching elements of that transition over four or even eight years to the age of twenty, providing everyone with a comfort zone.

How, then, was the average medieval Icelandic teenager to be sure when he could begin to assert his adult status with any confidence? Was it the age of judicial and legal responsibility, which seems to have been twelve? Was it sixteen, the age of responsibility for property management? Or was it twenty, the age at which appeals for recognition of abilities and claims ceased? According to Henderson Stewart the key features of the transition between age-groups are the entry and exit rules, that is to say, the criteria by which a young Icelandic was judged to have entered the period of transition from child to adult, and the irrefutable signal that the transition was complete.⁴⁴ The laws gave a number of clear indicators that the process began at the age of twelve with social, legal and criminal responsibility, however a clear exit point was lacking. In most social and legal arenas the laws left young men facing a period of phased transition from child to adult without a clear conclusion. If medieval Icelandic youths faced tensions and problems related to understanding their place in society during this period, it would not be surprising, given the lack of definition to be gained from the legal structures.

⁴² *Grágás*, Ia, pp. 225–26.

⁴³ *Grágás*, Ia, pp. 225–26, Ib, p. 76.

⁴⁴ Henderson Stewart, *Fundamentals*, p. 131.

The Contemporary Sagas

While it is not a convention of saga writing that the age of participants is given in every instance, or even in most instances, through a combination of explicit statements and conclusions drawn from dates given for key events in individual lives it is possible to talk with some accuracy about some of the many protagonists in the contemporary sagas in terms of their age at the points at which the transition to male adulthood was defined. These instances provide the basis for the comparison with the legal statements. By comparing the accounts of the medieval Icelanders in the contemporary sagas with the legal statements, it is possible to see the conflict of the ideologies of legal scholars and the apparent realities of practice that appear to have been credible to a thirteenth-century or early fourteenth-century audience, while bearing in mind that these sagas were also products of a literary tradition.⁴⁵ The contemporary sagas seem to confirm the arguments of anthropologists and historians in that acquisition of property, successful administration of the laws, physical courage and marriage were important signifiers of one's independence and claim to authority over others. However, these elements of the transition to adulthood were by no means achieved within clearly defined chronological boundaries. Some Icelandic youths, as portrayed in these sagas, both tested the extent to which the legal age limitations could be stretched and existed in a social, political and cultural world where intergenerational relationships determined advancement to adulthood as much as legal prescriptions.

Property

In terms of the transfer of property into the hands of young men at the age of sixteen, the contemporary sagas offer examples which suggest that there was a certain degree of flexibility in practice. For instance, in 1249, at the age of fifteen, Guðmundr Ormsson successfully petitioned his foster-father for his inheritance from his father, who had died when he was seven years old.⁴⁶ Moreover, on receiving his property, he left his foster-home and chose to live with his elder brother, which contradicts the legal statement that men under sixteen could

⁴⁵ Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, pp. 20–21; T.M. Andersson and W.I. Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga* (Stanford, 1989), pp. 10–11.

⁴⁶ *SS*, II, pp. 89–91.

not determine their place of residence. Similarly, Einarr Þorvaldsson took up his inheritance and chieftaincy at no more than fifteen years of age,⁴⁷ and Kolbeinn *ungi* Arnórsson, was fifteen, or possibly sixteen, when he took up management of a property in Hegranes.⁴⁸ However, what these three young men had in common was that their fathers had already died before they reached their legal majorities, which perhaps allowed for an earlier than usual transition to adulthood and also may suggest the significance of a father in influencing the timing of transition from child to adult of their sons. The contemporary sagas also provide evidence of young men whose fathers lived to guide their sons through this transitional period. Young men with living fathers would, it appears, be offered greater responsibilities over time. However, the age range for assumption of adult responsibility for property varied, although often occurred during a young man's late teens or early twenties. Ísleifr Gizurarson's father placed him and his elder brother in control of lands when he was between the ages of sixteen and twenty, and his brother no more than twenty-one.⁴⁹ Sturla Sighvatsson was in control of one of the family properties by the age of twenty-two.⁵⁰ In this case the property was a substantial family possession which was given to him with the full support of his father. Similarly his cousin Þoðvarr had received a large family farm at some time during his twenties from his father Þórðr.⁵¹ In these cases evidence of a specific age of transition to this aspect of adulthood, or even an age range, is unclear. If control of property was a key feature signalling the end of the transition from childhood to adulthood in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, this would have had a significant impact upon men from the chieftain class whose fathers were unable or unwilling to provide an independent property for their sons, or who had already selected another son for that position. However, in cases of inheritance where sixteen was specified as the earliest possible age in the legal statements, it appears that the sagas support a transition that was either roughly in line with the legal statements, or even slightly anticipated them.

There were also cases which demonstrate that even younger Icelanders were wielding considerable power well before the age of sixteen.

⁴⁷ *SS*, II, p. 10.

⁴⁸ *SS*, I, p. 311.

⁴⁹ *SS*, II, p. 149.

⁵⁰ *SS*, I, p. 287.

⁵¹ *SS*, I, p. 303.

Snorri Þorvaldsson began to share the administration of the family chieftaincy with his elder brother when he was only fourteen years old.⁵² Kolbeinn Tumason was even more precocious. He became a chieftain at twelve, or possibly even eleven, in 1184–85.⁵³ The transfer of a property, in the sense that the power of a chieftaincy in Iceland was also a saleable commodity, appears to have conformed mostly to the legal statements. This sample is small, and the relative youth of these two chieftains was emphasized explicitly in the text, which suggests that although accounted for in the laws these were exceptional cases and may also represent the literary topos of the precocious child signalling a future significance in the saga's narrative.

Legal Skill

Control of property was one determining factor in signalling the end of childhood, and another important element of that transition was participation in litigation. Iceland was a particularly litigious society in which prowess in the law was a central skill for a man who aspired to power. It is hard to gauge from the small number of explicit statements about the age of young men in the law courts how common the participation of relatively young men in legal cases would have been. While the legal statements allow for such eventualities, it is probable that those whose participation at particularly young ages is described may again demonstrate the topos, signalling future greatness or a tragically early demise through the pathos of early promise denied.⁵⁴ The former scenario is evident in the case of the future, and only, earl of Iceland, Gizurr Þorvaldsson, whose prosecution of the murderer of his elder half-brother in 1221, at the tender age of twelve, ensured that he was the youngest participant in legal proceedings recorded in the saga.⁵⁵ The latter is illustrated by Guðmundr Ormsson who, while still fifteen, had been present at the *þing* and had intervened in a legal action brought by his brother against Guðmundr's foster-father.⁵⁶

⁵² SS, I, p. 323.

⁵³ SS, I, p. 161.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the use of such devices see M. Rothstein, 'Teen Knights: Interpreting Precocity in Early Modern Life-Stories', in *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society 1150–1650*, ed. by K. Eisenbichler (Toronto, 2002), pp. 173–88 (p. 186).

⁵⁵ SS, I, p. 283.

⁵⁶ SS, II, p. 90.

Legal superstardom aside, there is evidence in the contemporary sagas that young men in their teens and twenties participated more routinely in the Icelandic political and legal arena. Sturla Þórðarson at the age of thirteen travelled to the *þing* on his father's behalf with the authority of the chieftaincy which he was to transfer to his uncle Snorri, and at fourteen he travelled with his elder brother about the district on errands for his father.⁵⁷ Ormr Bjarnarson undertook negotiations for peace on behalf of his step-father when he was no older than nineteen.⁵⁸ Órækja Snorrason prosecuted a case for his father at the age of eighteen, a less impressive feat than the precocious Gizurr Þorvaldsson, but perhaps more convincing for it.⁵⁹ There could also be less than pleasant aspects to entering the adult political world as Jón *murtr* Snorrason and Þorgils Bøðvarsson discovered at ages seventeen and fifteen respectively when they were employed as hostages to firm up the alliances of their fathers.⁶⁰ The involvement of youths in their teens in the adult milieu of litigation and political negotiation presents a clear argument for a period of transition to adulthood in which the youngsters were actively pursuing relevant skills and experience, rather than passively awaiting prescribed and scheduled rites of passage. How long they remained in this training phase may to some extent have depended upon their performance and the public recognition of how well they learned the requisite skills rather than a fixed end point.

Callow has also addressed the question of ages stated in the family sagas and he concludes that twelve and fifteen are the commonest ages explicitly given by the saga writers, generally accompanying an act of unusual maturity.⁶¹ Thus a narrative convention for indicating the transitional phase of adolescence may be indicated by this. Comparison with the less numerous sample in the contemporary sagas may well indicate at least a partial use of this topos. But the contemporary sagas provide a wider range of ages. This suggests that, unlike Callow's identification of a definite predominance of two transitional ages (twelve and fifteen), in the contemporary sagas the topos is either used for a comparative purpose, portraying one protagonist as more mature than others, or that the topos is used selectively where it suits the aims of the writer,

⁵⁷ *SS*, I, pp. 315, 320.

⁵⁸ *SS*, I, p. 390.

⁵⁹ *SS*, I, p. 301.

⁶⁰ *SS*, I, p. 286; II, p. 105.

⁶¹ Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood', p. 50.

but in other instances perhaps the stated age is the approximation by the writer of an activity within the life-span of a known individual.

Martial Skill

The legal statements make no specific reference to the age at which a young man might attain and exhibit prowess in arms. However, there were prescriptions concerning violence, which held anybody over the age of twelve responsible for their actions.⁶² In this sense the laws would appear to suggest both that demonstrating martial skill and being held accountable for the outcomes were possible from the age of twelve. The contemporary sagas do not often comment on the age of participants in violence, and where they do, it probable that the age of a protagonist was explicitly stated to effect a response from the saga audience, either of shock, approbation or a perhaps a combination of the two. Nevertheless, while the description of some very young participants in violence may have been included for the purpose of achieving a reaction, it does not follow participation by youngsters in violent encounters did not occur. Given Byock's thesis that the sagas tended to overstate the level of violence which existed in Iceland, it is also possible that youngsters accompanied their elders on martial expeditions precisely because an encounter that resulted in actual violence was rare.⁶³ Indeed it was not unheard of for such meetings to deteriorate into a volley of stones in which even the very young might join without needing any great skill or length of time spent in training with weapons.

In the contemporary sagas very little in the way of specific information about the age at which young men began to take part in violent encounters exists. Ogmundr *sneis* Þorvarðsson was portrayed, in 1171, as playing a game in which his toys were a sword and a shield, a game which took place when he was probably between ten and thirteen years of age.⁶⁴ The incident is very probably apocryphal given that it is included in the hagiographic saga of his cousin Bishop Guðmundr,

⁶² Grágás, Ia, p. 166.

⁶³ J.L. Byock, 'The Age of the Sturlungs', in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages, A Symposium*, ed. by E. Vestergaard (Odense, 1986), pp. 27–42 (pp. 30–31, 33).

⁶⁴ *SS*, I, p. 123. Although Ogmundr's age is not explicitly stated, the saga implies that his father's first child, a daughter, was the result of an affair he had at the age of seventeen in 1157 (*SS*, I, pp. 72–73), Ogmundr's birth must therefore have taken place after 1157 placing his age at no more than thirteen.

however, it suggests that the image of a male child playing at being a warrior, and by association that martial skill was an acquired masculine trait, would not have been unfamiliar concepts for a saga audience. Yet there are a few examples of youngsters taking a more active role in armed combat than playing with toy weapons. Contrast Qgmundr *sneis*'s innocuous game with the actual behaviour of Sigmundr Qgmundarson. In 1252, Sigmundr, at the age of eleven or twelve, participated in an ambush, and while he did not fight, he exhorted his companions to kill one of their opponents.⁶⁵ This bloodthirsty little monster was not alone. In 1239, Einarr Þorvaldsson, at the age of thirteen, accompanied his elder half-brother Illugi on an expedition with the express purpose of seeking out their father's killers for revenge.⁶⁶ Similarly, in 1252, fourteen-year-old Ketilbjörn Gizurarson was called upon to bring a contingent of men to his father to take part in a fight.⁶⁷ In 1232, Klængr Bjarnarson, as a sixteen-year-old, had his own following, enabling him to instigate expeditions, not merely to participate in them.⁶⁸ There is also the suggestion that thirteenth-century teenage Icelanders were very aware of their rights of self-determination in this respect. In 1250, Guðmundr Ormsson at the age of sixteen cited his right to act independently as a rebuff to his mother's attempt to dissuade him from participating in an expedition with his elder brother.⁶⁹ It is worth noting that in each of these instances of precocious violence, the ages of the youths were explicitly stated, which suggests that the saga author intended to provoke a response from his audience. Prowess in arms appears to have functioned as a means of expressing masculinity identity to the Icelandic saga audience; however, how far it functioned as a determinant of male maturity is more problematic.

Sex and Marriage

It was noted above that the laws made no specific stipulations about marriage or sexual maturity. The age of sexual maturity and the age at which one could legally marry were not necessarily the same thing

⁶⁵ SS, II, p. 101.

⁶⁶ SS, I, p. 445.

⁶⁷ SS, I, p. 477.

⁶⁸ SS, I, p. 347.

⁶⁹ SS, II, p. 91: *kveðst svá aldrs kominn, at hann myndi sjálf ráða ferðum sínum*. Guðmundr tells his mother that he is of an age to decide for himself whether to take part in an expedition in 1250.

at all. The contemporary sagas demonstrate that these issues were complex and added another layer of imprecision on the circuitous path to adulthood. With sexual maturity came responsibilities, potentially as a husband and a father, which could occur before the law recognised the full adult status of the young man involved. For example, Þorvarðr and Ari Þorgeirsson were brothers who both embarked upon sexual relationships, resulting in children, while still legally in the limbo of transition from child to adult themselves. The former was seventeen, the latter may have been as young as fourteen, but certainly no older than sixteen, when their relationships began.⁷⁰ Neither of the brothers, at the inception of their relationships, possessed property, influence or a reputation for legal prowess. Þorvarðr became a father of at least two children, by more than one mistress, by the time he was twenty, and Ari was the father of four children by his mistress, Úlfheiðr, by the time he was twenty-one. The legal statements make clear that a man was responsible for his offspring, both legitimate and illegitimate, yet it is unclear what the legal position of a father was when he had not reached an age of legal maturity himself.⁷¹ Similarly, Gizurr Þorvaldsson's marriage at fifteen is the only example of such an early age for nuptials.⁷² According to the legal statements this marriage left him in an extremely confused position as far as property holding would have been concerned. The groom would have had the right to administer his wife's property as her husband, but would have been considered too young to administer his own or that of any other party. However, these considerations do not seem to have impacted upon the families who negotiated the match.

While very early marriage does not appear to have been common, it was not unusual for men in their late teens and early twenties to have affairs and illegitimate children. For example, Sturla Sighvatsson's mother, Halldóra, quietly ensured that her son's mistress and illegitimate daughter were removed from his household, before the newly-wed twenty-four-year-old returned to the property with his bride.⁷³ These cases raise questions about the age at which social responsibility began, and whether society accepted and practiced different criteria of male adulthood to those indicated by the legal structures. However, sexual

⁷⁰ *SS*, I, pp. 72–73, 118, 123.

⁷¹ *Grágás*, Ib, p. 23.

⁷² *SS*, I, pp. 480, 302.

⁷³ *SS*, I, p. 299.

maturity and fatherhood of illegitimate children may not have equated to social maturity and acceptance as a fully adult male. Historians have argued that by engaging in pre-marital affairs young men were attempting to establish themselves as equivalent to the status of married men; however, the illicit and unsanctioned nature of the relationships ensured that far from rivalling the achieved adult masculinity of married men, they merely highlighted their own immature masculinity.⁷⁴ The Icelandic situation was in many ways very different to the Continental European experience in this period. Illegitimacy, while not a wholly desirable status, could still be overcome if one's connections were good enough. Indeed marriage as an institution appears to have been a concept which passed by almost the entire Oddaverjar family throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, it is clear from the contemporary sagas that for many young Icelandic men, marriage appears to have been a goal worth attaining, and worth attaining quickly. To take a sample of seventeen men for whom an age at marriage can be ascertained, the average age at marriage was a relatively young twenty-four, and the majority of these men married in their late teens or early twenties.

Tosh describes bachelorhood as 'always an ambivalent status', and it would appear that many Icelandic men did not relish a prolonged period as unmarried men.⁷⁵ This may well reflect the importance placed by Ditz on men's access to women as an indicator of their accession to the fullest adult masculine status.⁷⁶ Perhaps the most interesting case in terms of discovering in what ways marriage formed an important part of exiting this transitional stage in a young man's life is that of Jón *murtr* Snorrason. Jón was evidently sufficiently motivated towards marriage that his frustration with his father's refusal to provide a satisfactory settlement led him to leave the country in disgust.⁷⁷ Was his discontent related to his expectation of being married before the age of twenty-five? Or did his relationship with his father lead him to seek marriage in order to bring about his transition to adulthood at an accelerated rate simply to be free of him? Certainly his case suggests

⁷⁴ C. Newman, *The Anglo-Norman Nobility in the Reign of Henry I: The Second Generation* (Philadelphia, 1988), p. 46; Aird, 'Frustrated Masculinity', p. 50; Rothstein, 'Teen Knights', pp. 185–86.

⁷⁵ J. Tosh, 'What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), 179–202 (p. 185).

⁷⁶ Ditz, 'The New Men's History', pp. 11, 14.

⁷⁷ SS, I, p. 335.

Table 1. Age at marriage of some Icelandic men as described in the contemporary sagas.

Name	Age at marriage	References
Arnórr Tumason	<25	SS, I, pp. 238, 287
Kolbeinn <i>ungi</i> Arnórsson	<22	SS, I, pp. 52, 287, 245
Kálfr Brandsson	20	SS, I, p. 257; II, p. 85
Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson	21–26	SS, I, pp. 116–18, 125
Ingimundr Þorgeirsson	<30	SS, I, pp. 116–17, 124
Björn Þorvaldsson	<27–30	SS, I, pp. 60–62, 230, 243, 270
Gizurr Þorvaldsson	15	SS, I, pp. 283, 302
Hallr Gizurarson	21	SS, I, pp. 458, 480
Hvammr Sturla Þórðarson	32	SS, I, pp. 60, 66
Þórðr Sturluson	21	SS, I, pp. 229, 231
Sighvatr Sturluson	27	SS, I, pp. 229, 233
Snorri Sturluson	19	SS, I, pp. 229, 237
Bǫðvarr Þórðarson	25–32	SS, I, pp. 232, 268; II, p. 104
Sturla Þórðarson	25	SS, I, p. 303; II, pp. 149, 236
Sturla Sighvatsson	24	SS, I, pp. 237, 299
Jón <i>murtr</i> Snorrason*	25	SS, I, pp. 304, 335
Órækja Snorrason	27	SS, I, pp. 301, 359

* Jón *murtr* Snorrason did not marry at 25, but this was the age at which he entered into a bitter dispute with his father over the provision of property to support his ambition to marry.

that marriage was one of the important markers for the transition to male adulthood. It may also represent themes, explored by Larrington in this volume, of the father / son conflict and of the first independent journey as signifiers of a male adolescent working towards emancipation as a male adult.

Conclusion

The contemporary saga evidence suggests that medieval Icelandic youths may have tested the entry criteria of male adulthood and attempted through their actions to meet or even breach them. In some cases they anticipated the legal age barriers by exhibiting behaviour which would prove their early maturity; either through property management, advocacy or participation in the adult activities of politics, fighting, extra-marital relationships and marriage. Adulthood, particularly perhaps male adulthood, depended upon performance and recogni-

tion of that performance. The legal statements may appear to have favoured a physiological age-based structure for managing transition to male adulthood, but a closer reading of the laws in combination with the narrative sources demonstrates that the boundaries were blurred, reflecting a system in which, as Kerzter and Keith explain, a 'cultural recognition' of attained skills, possessions and social standing were key to an Icelandic youth's progress to full adult male status.⁷⁸ Moreover, in the sagas there is no evidence that the medieval Icelanders strictly observed twelve as the age of juridical and physical responsibility, sixteen as the age of competence and accession to property, and twenty as the last chance saloon for the slow to develop. The impression given by *Grágás* that transition to adulthood for an Icelandic male involved stages, rather than a fixed point, is both confirmed by, and complicated by, the contemporary sagas. The evidence from *Sturlunga saga* demonstrates that the ages at which certain milestones were achieved were even more varied than the laws allowed. The blurring of the point of transition meant that there was no clear, universally accepted point, or points, at which men had to receive property, become active in the law, or marry, and consequently fathers or other dominant males had a very important role in either permitting or withholding these elements of adult status from younger men. This could have created a fertile area for frustration to flourish, which might potentially be compounded by the gendered implications of the transition.

Male adulthood was as much a social construct as a legal status. There was a period of fluidity, created by the legal and social framework of statements and expectations, which provided an important background to the actions of young men. There was no single boundary or structure which denoted adulthood had been achieved, but rather there were multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting boundaries and structures. These various means of representing oneself as adult could either be adhered to, ignored, or exploited at this key transitional stage in the male life-cycle. The ambiguity surrounding their status may have allowed young Icelandic men to explore the possibilities of adulthood gradually, rather than making a sudden, 'rites of passage' style entry into the adult male world. But this system also blurred the boundaries of the stages of adolescence and adulthood, thereby opening up the

⁷⁸ Kerzter and Keith, *Age*, pp. 99–101.

potential for confusion and even intergenerational conflict as both older and younger men sought to negotiate this loosely defined stage in the younger male's life.

The ambiguity surrounding the attainment of social and legal maturity may help us to better understand Hrafn Oddsson's claim to be too young, inexperienced and generally weedy, to play a part in Þórðr *kakali's* expedition. In light of what has been learned about young men's participation in the legal, social and sometimes violent political life of the elite, the comment of the saga writer at the end of Hrafn's refusal to take part, that he was then sixteen years old, takes on the appearance of a cutting observation. Youths of sixteen and younger certainly could, and probably did, take an active role in expeditions which resulted in violence, and a youth like Hrafn, who was a property holder and thereby had already fulfilled one of the criteria of entry into male adulthood, had less of an excuse to refuse than most. Yet we should not be too quick to judge Hrafn a coward, or even just a slow developer. A year earlier, in 1241, when he was fifteen, he took part in an expedition with Órækja Snorrason who, while not a chieftain, wielded a great deal of authority at that time.⁷⁹ So Hrafn's reply to Þórðr that he had not taken part in an expedition with a chieftain, while not mendacious, was certainly disingenuous. Which begs the question, why, if he were not intimidated by the prospect of a violent engagement, would the saga state that he asserted his unsuitability and childishness, at an age when other young Icelanders seem to have been intent on demonstrating their aptitude and maturity? Placing the incident in its political context offers one possible solution. It may be that Hrafn was seeking a diplomatic response to a difficult situation. Þórðr was one of the main political protagonists in Iceland at that time, and he was seeking to increase his influence. But his chosen opponent was Kolbeinn *ungi* Arnórsson, a chieftain whose own power was very great. Hrafn would not necessarily have wanted to become involved in national politics and to antagonize a man as powerful as Kolbeinn, when he had only recently come into control of his inheritance. But since Hrafn was in a vulnerable position, as a chieftain at only sixteen, he would not have wanted to alienate Þórðr *kakali* either. His reply could have been a masterly piece of political spin, which attempted to get him temporarily off the hook with both political heavyweights,

⁷⁹ SS, I, p. 449.

possibly until he could see which of these powerful men would get the upper hand. However, eventually Hrafn was prevailed upon to contribute to the expedition. Whatever may have been behind his attempt to deny aid to Þórðr, he was unable to maintain his refusal in the face of Þórðr's reminder of his obligation to kin members, whose death had been caused by Kolbeinn, and his own brother-in-law's close association with Þórðr. Yet what is interesting from the point of view of this paper, is not the outcome of his exchange with Þórðr, but the position which he adopts as part of their negotiation. The use of the ambiguity surrounding this stage of his development as a political tool, however unsuccessful that attempt may ultimately have proven, demonstrates that not only did the multiple structures and multiple boundaries established by twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic society to mark the transition to adulthood have the potential to leave young men confused about their status within that society, but also that astute youths could manipulate that very uncertainty for their own ends.

AWKWARD ADOLESCENTS: MALE MATURATION IN NORSE LITERATURE

Carolyn Larrington

The Old Norse language does not have a term for adolescence as such; thus we may wonder whether we can discuss the phenomenon at all if the culture itself does not identify it.¹ However, even if there is no term for it in Old Norse, adolescence is rooted in the biological universal of puberty; cross-cultural psychological evidence suggests that pre-industrial societies usually identify a transitional stage between childhood and the adult world for their young people.² 'Adolescence as a social stage with its own activities and behaviors, expectations and rewards, is well recorded in the history and literature of earlier times', Schlegel and Barry note.³ Adolescence, in their broad anthropological definition, is a time when learning is occurring and social roles are being restructured; although the young man remains subordinate to community elders, he is preparing for adulthood and manifestly no longer a child.⁴ Many traditional societies mark this transition with rites of passage, formal public events which may involve three or four separate stages, outlined below.⁵ Explicit rites of passage are not described in Old Norse sources, although Mary Danielli has argued that initiation rites for the young

¹ For the so-called 'emic' problem, see Pierre R. Dasen, 'Rapid Social Change and the Turmoil of Adolescence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective', *International Journal of Group Tensions*, 29, 1/2, (2000) 17–49 (p. 18).

² For recent general discussion of the psychology of adolescence in western societies, see Peter K. Smith, Helen Cowie and Mark Blades, *Understanding Children's Development*, 4th edn (Oxford, 2003), pp. 281–316. Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry III, *Adolescence: an Anthropological Enquiry* (New York, 1991) offers cross-cultural evidence for the existence of adolescence in all 175 societies they investigated. See also Percivall, this volume, for further references to anthropological discussion of the boy-man transition.

³ Schlegel and Barry, *Adolescence*, p. 2.

⁴ Schlegel and Barry, *Adolescence*, p. 43; see also Dasen, 'Rapid Social Change', pp. 17–26.

⁵ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 94–130; Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London, 1960); Cassandra H. Delancy, 'Rites of Passage in Adolescence', *Adolescence*, 30 (1995), 891–97. A recent collection dealing with fourteenth-century ideas of rites of passage is *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by Nicola McDonald and William Mark Ormrod (Woodbridge, 2004).

Icelander might occur at the ancestral home in Norway, involving ritual encounters with bears and berserks.⁶ The sagas of Icelanders do not tend to observe that a boy has become a man.⁷ Nevertheless Turner's analysis of such rites as consisting in separation, a liminal stage, and reincorporation is suggestive both for saga literature and also for the heroic paradigms upon which it may draw. The first independent journey which the saga hero makes, sometimes only as far as the Alþingi, but most frequently abroad, to visit Norway or to take part in a raiding trip, might well be regarded as incorporating rite-of-passage elements, marking the young man's readiness to negotiate the transition into the world of adult political and economic activity.⁸

In contemporary medieval literature from elsewhere in Europe, in scientific treatises and works derived from classical learning, a distinct stage of the *iuvēnis* or young man is identified.⁹ Late medieval historical records often identify young men as a problematic stratum, especially in urban society.¹⁰ Although medieval masculinities have become a subject of scholarly interest, there has been relatively little discussion of the transition in Old Norse until very recently.¹¹ Anna Hansen's

⁶ Mary Danielli, 'Initiation Ceremonial from Norse Literature', *Folklore*, 56 (1945), 229–45.

⁷ For legal provisions regarding the transition see Anna Hansen, 'Representations of Children in Early Icelandic Society' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sydney, 2006), pp. 60–68 and Percivall, this volume. References to 'sagas' in this article are to the sagas of Icelanders; where discussion is of *fornaldarsögur* they are designated as such. Nic Percivall, this volume, examines the evidence for the transition from boy to man in contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*). See also Chris Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society' in *Children, Childhood and Society* ed. by Sally Crawford and Gillian Shepherd, IAA Interdisciplinary Series: Studies in Archaeology, History, Literature and Art (Oxford, 2007), pp. 45–55, on the significance of the ages twelve and fifteen in the *Íslendingasögur*.

⁸ Margaret Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway: Essential Rites of Passage for an Early Icelandic Skald', *Alvissmál*, 9 (1999), 55–72 acknowledges the function of the journey in her title, though her argument is more concerned with cultural relations between Iceland and Norway.

⁹ See John A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: a Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 5–54 for discussion of four- and seven-age models and Percivall, this volume.

¹⁰ Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, 2003), p. 14.

¹¹ *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare Lees with the assistance of Thelma Fenster and JoAnn McNamara (Minneapolis, 1994); Karras, *From Boys to Men*, and Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, 'The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons', in *Medieval Family Roles: a Book of Essays*, ed. by Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York, 1996), pp. 173–96. See now, however, Russell Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, and Society in *Grettis saga*', *Alvissmál*, 11 (2004), 3–16; Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Kolbítur verður

recent doctoral thesis touches on adolescence issues, but is substantially concerned with younger children.¹²

Saga texts chart, to varying degrees, a transition from a partly-imagined warrior culture to an agricultural and civil society. Thus by the time that *Grettis saga* is composed, the traits to which the adolescent male aspires in the earlier viking era have changed; the old type of masculinity is now coded as anti-social.¹³ It should be noted, of course, that the sagas, both family and legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), have a problematic relationship to historical medieval Icelandic society; this essay deals strictly with an Old Norse imaginary, but one which is formed by a historical reality.¹⁴ Of the five major areas of adolescent anxiety identified by Steinberg, identity, autonomy, intimacy, sexuality and achievement, three (identity, autonomy and achievement) are demonstrably at stake in saga accounts of adolescence.¹⁵ The striking up of independent intimate relations is less foregrounded in the texts examined here, though significant, lifelong friendships, as in the case of Egill and Arinbjörn, may commence in this period. Marriage, signalling sexual maturity, is often postponed until the young man's return from his first voyage, though he may have become betrothed before departure.¹⁶

This essay will explore how saga texts are likely to have inherited two paradigms of adolescence from heroic tradition, and assimilated them to—what I hesitate to call realist modes—but rather, particular psychological and sociological understandings of the processes of adolescence. The sagas' views of the boy-to-man transition are often

karlmaður', in *Miðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2005), pp. 87–100, Callow, 'Transitions' and Percivall, this volume.

¹² Hansen, 'Representations of Children in Early Icelandic Society'.

¹³ Örnólfur Thorsson, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* (Reykjavík, 1998), xxxi–xxiii. Dasan, 'Rapid Social Change' addresses the ways in which social change affects adolescent behaviour and its perception by the older generation. See also Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, 'Nokkrar hugleiðingar um kynbundið uppeldi á miðöldum', in *Miðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2005), pp. 101–112 (pp. 103–08).

¹⁴ See Callow, 'Transitions' for analysis of the *Íslendingasögur* as historical evidence for adolescence in thirteenth-century Iceland and Judith Jesch, "'Youth on the Prow": Three Young Kings in the Late Viking Age', in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Philip Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 123–39 for a study of eleventh-century youthful kings.

¹⁵ Laurence Steinberg, *Adolescence*, 3rd edn (New York, 1993), p. 17.

¹⁶ Percivall, this volume, considers the role of early illicit sexual relations and of marriage as markers of male maturity in the *samtíðarsögur*.

consonant with the ways adolescence is constructed as problematic by contemporary psychologists, consisting in conflict with parents, mood disruptions and risk behaviour.¹⁷

Saga-writers—both *fornaldarsögur* authors and writers of family sagas—adapted the cluster of features associated with adolescence in heroic material (the stereotypes of the child prodigy and the *kolbítir*) to suit their generic understanding of the saga hero's coming of age and his assimilation of prevailing models of masculinity.¹⁸ The young man is anxious to behave in a way which he, his family, and sometimes the saga author, identify as *karlmannlíga* ('manly'). It might be expected that *fornaldarsaga* treatments should be closer to the stark, unrealistic motifs of heroic poetry, while family sagas would reconstitute the inherited patterns within a realist, psychological and political framework, but this generalisation does not, in fact, hold up. In this essay I shall discuss two family sagas, and two *fornaldarsögur*, analysing the portrayal of the protagonist's adolescence primarily in terms of intra-familial and extra-familial (largely peer) relations. The texts considered are: *Egils saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Ketils saga hængs* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. The first two *Íslendingasögur* are frequently cited in this context; that *fornaldarsögur* are also a valuable source of evidence for contemporary *mentalités* is now becoming accepted.¹⁹

Vertical relations, the bonds between parent and child, are suppressed by and large in heroic material in favour of a sustained exploration of horizontal—sibling and affinal—ties. The Œdipal triangulation of father, mother and son comes under scrutiny in three of our four sagas; in these narratives the heroic motif of the hero's posthumous birth is transmuted into an emotional alienation between father and son. Parent-child conflict is frequent, but by no means a universal in

¹⁷ See Smith, Cowie and Blades, *Understanding Children's Development*, pp. 281–316; Jeffrey Arnett, 'Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered', *American Psychologist*, 54, 317–26.

¹⁸ For documentation of current debates about medieval masculinity, see Percivall, this volume.

¹⁹ '[T]he *fornaldarsögur* project the aspirations and preoccupations of the thirteenth century onto heroes of the distant past, in quite an overt fashion' writes Torfi Tulinius, in *The Matter of the North: the Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. by Randi C. Eldevik, The Viking Collection, 13 (Odense, 2002), p. 294. See also Torfi Tulinius, 'Framliðnir feður: um forneskju og frásagnalist í Eyrbyggju, Eglu og Grettlu', *Heiðin minni: greinar um fornar bókmennir*, ed. by Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík, 1999), pp. 283–316, and Asdís Egíldóttir, 'Kolbítur verður karlmaður'.

human adolescence.²⁰ The psychoanalytic theory that the child has to achieve a final working-out of its Œdipal conflicts at this particular life-stage, as maintained by Anna Freud, and then by Peter Blos, that adolescence is ‘a second individuation process’ no longer holds sway.²¹ Nevertheless existing family dynamics are thought profoundly to affect the experience of adolescence.²² Egill’s dealings with his father Skalla-Grímr exemplify the worst father-son relations in saga literature, though Grettir runs him a close second. Egill shares the precocity of heroes like Helgi Hundingsbani, composing his first poem at the age of three and committing his first murder at the age of seven, but his father is irritated by his behaviour, refusing to take him to a feast at his grandfather’s house on the grounds that he will not behave in company.²³ Skalla-Grímr’s competitive rage against his son seems likely to be compounded by the fact that in appearance and temperament they are very similar: *er hann óx upp, þá mátti brátt sjá á honum, at hann myndi verða mjök ljótr ok líkr feðr sínum.*²⁴

Egill’s mother, Bera, however, sees viking material in him after he has killed an older child and prophesies that a raiding ship will appear in his future: *kvað Egil vera víkingsefni ok kvað þat mundu fyrir liggja, þegar hann hefði aldr til, at honum væri fengin herskip*, fuelling his ambitions to surpass the limited horizons of his father’s farm and forge.²⁵ Egill’s killing takes place during the *knattleikr* games, a socially-sanctioned forum for controlled aggression and social interaction which is an important part of the adolescent experience, discussed further below.²⁶ The Œdipal tensions between father and son come to a climax when Skalla-Grímr

²⁰ Arnett, ‘Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered’.

²¹ Peter Blos, *On Adolescence: a Psychanalytic Interpretation* (New York, 1962), p. 291.

²² See for example Jeffrey Arnett, ‘Reckless Behaviour in Adolescence: a Developmental Perspective’, *Developmental Review*, 12 (1992), 339–73.

²³ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), pp. 80–83. See, in particular, Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 27 (2003), 5–24; Hansen, ‘Representations’, 121–23; and Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir-Yershova, this volume, on Egill’s precocity. Callow, ‘Transitions’, p. 52 suggests that the saga implies that Egill is inadequately supervised; the impression is given that Egill is left alone at home and consequently chooses an unsuitable horse for the perilous journey to his grandfather’s.

²⁴ *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, p. 80: ‘when he grew up it could soon be seen that he would be very ugly and like his father’.

²⁵ *Egils saga*, p. 100; Jesch, ‘Youth on the Prow’ observes that the heroic career of youthful kings begins (according to skaldic encomia) by preparing, then launching, their own ships.

²⁶ See John D. Martin, ‘“Svá lýkr hér hverju hestaðingi”: Sports and Games in Icelandic Saga Literature’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 75 (2003), 25–44.

almost murders his son in a shape-changing frenzy.²⁷ Egill and his friend Þórðr have drawn Skalla-Grímr as their opponent in the games, and as Skalla-Grímr tires, they start winning. The *hamrammr* ('shape-changing') fury comes upon Skalla-Grímr; fatally injuring Þórðr, he turns on Egill (*síðan greip hann til Egils*). The young man is only saved by the self-sacrifice of his foster-mother Þorgerðr brák who, turning her own magic against the enraged father, names what Skalla-Grímr is doing, in the hope perhaps of shaming him out of his conduct: '*Hamask þú nú, Skalla-Grímr, at syni þínum*' ('you are using shape-magic now, Skalla-Grímr, against your son'). Skalla-Grímr seizes her and hurls her over a cliff. The troubled relations between Egill and his father are never exactly repaired; Egill avenges these deaths by killing one of Skalla-Grímr's favourite workers, and the father and son stop speaking to one another for an entire winter. Finally Egill requests a division of property so that he can go abroad with his brother, Þórólfr, intending to formalise the separation from the child life-stage by embarking on the quasi-rite of passage.²⁸ The father-son relationship is rebuilt to a limited extent when Egill returns from his travels and lives with his father again, but his failure to share the compensation which he got from King Aðalsteinn for the dead Þórólfr rankles with the old man, and it is the subject of a quarrel just before Skalla-Grímr's death.²⁹ Egill takes sensible precautions when his father dies to prevent him from becoming a *draugr* ('revenant') who might return to haunt the family; he breaks down the wall of the house to take the body outside and buries Skalla-Grímr with full honours in a mound at the end of a distant headland, inscribing in the landscape the alienation between father and son.³⁰

Grettir's family relations are less dramatically rendered than Egill's but there is no less rancour in the father-son interactions. Grettir grows up amid 'a complex and toxic familial dynamic', as Russell Poole notes.³¹ Grettir shows signs of laziness; he is *ekki bráðgörr* (not

²⁷ *Egils saga*, pp. 101–02.

²⁸ *Egils saga*, p. 102.

²⁹ *Egils saga*, pp. 173–74.

³⁰ See William Sayers, 'The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 242–63 for these precautions. See also Tulinius, 'Framliðnir feður', pp. 301–04.

³¹ Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, and Society', p. 11. This article addresses some interesting questions about Grettir's psychology and necessarily has some degree of overlap with the present study.

promising) in youth, though the *kolbíttr*-topos is not fully-realised. The ill-feeling between father and son comes to a climax when Grettir is ten, and Ásmundr asks him to do some tasks around the farm.³² Grettir is displeased by the lowliness and unmanliness of the jobs assigned to him.³³ Taking care of the geese is *lítit verk ok lqðrmannligt* ('a small job and unworthy of a man'), he objects, but Ásmundr makes carrying out the task a condition of improving their relationship: '*leys þú þetta vel af hendi, ok mun þá batna með okkr*' ('carry it out well and things will get better between us'). Grettir wrings the necks of the goslings and breaks the geese's wings. Grettir is given a second chance: he is to take on the equally demeaning task of scratching his father's back as he sits by the fire. This strikes him as no more acceptable: '*Heitt mun þat um hqnd [...] en þó er verkit lqðrmannligt*' ('it will be hot for the hands [...] and yet the job is unworthy of a man'). Assigning a task which places him at the fireside is, in Grettir's view, to make him into the *kolbíttr* which, despite his indolence, is not a role that he has deliberately chosen for himself. Grettir's chore comes to an end when he drags a sharp wool-comb down his back, in direct response to a taunt from his father. Ásmundr gives Grettir a third task, taking care of Ásmundr's favourite horse, Kengála. This meets with mixed approval from the boy; unlike skulking by the fire, it is *kalt verk ok karlmannligt* ('a cold job, and suitable for a man'). That he has to tend to a mare, an animal which symbolises effeminacy in the discourse of *níð*, may belie Grettir's initial assessment of the job as *karlmannligt*; he also dislikes the mare's habit of grazing where it is coldest.³⁴ Grettir treats Kengála with such appalling cruelty that she has to be destroyed. In the end it is Ásdís, Grettir's mother, who points out the folly of the two men's behaviour: '*Eigi veit ek, hvárt mér þykkir meir frá móti, at þú skipar honum jafnan starfa, eða hitt, at hann leysir alla einn veg af hendi*', she complains.³⁵

³² *Grettis saga*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík, 1936), pp. 37–42.

³³ Cf. Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 188–92. *Lqðrmannligt* clearly functions as an antonym of *karlmannligt* here.

³⁴ See Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Nórront Níð* (Odense, 1980), pp. 19, 34, 44, 46, 88, 100; for English translation, see *The Unmanly Man*, trans. by Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), 16, 29, 36, 38, 71, 80.

³⁵ 'I don't know which is more immoderate, that you keep giving him jobs or that he does them all in the same way.' See Poole, 'Myth, Psychology and Society', pp. 7–9.

Ketill of *Ketils saga hængs* is a full-blown *kolbítur* who has a fractious relationship with his father, Hallbjörn hálftröll.³⁶ When his father rebukes him for hanging around by the fire and urges him to try to improve their relationship (*þá mundi batna með þeim*), Ketill huffily disappears for three nights. He returns with a chair, which he gives to his mother, saying that he has *henni meiri ást eiga at launa en föður sínum* ('from her he has more love to reward than from his father').³⁷ Still Hallbjörn sees potential in his son; instead of asking him to do the demeaning tasks which Ásmundr imposes on Grettir, he tries to introduce him to adult responsibilities by asking him to help with the hay. Although Ketill breaks two carts in the process, the hay is brought in prodigiously quickly. The delighted Hallbjörn declares that it is time for Ketill to take over looking after the animals, drawing attention, as he will in a later incident, to the difference between Ketill's youthful vigour and his own advancing years: *'þú ert nú ungr ok upprennandi ok til alls vel fær, en ek gerumst gamall ok stíðr ok til einkis meir'*.³⁸ Ketill refuses to accept the responsibility of *ffjárvarðveizlu*; like Grettir and Egill he envisages a grander future for himself than 'making hay, or mucking out cow stalls'.³⁹ In partial recognition of his son's ambitions, Hallbjörn gives him an axe and warns him not to go outside after nightfall and not to go to the island north of the farm; prohibitions calculated to challenge Ketill's heroic mettle. After another adventure, discussed in detail below which results in his first, somewhat accidental, killing, Ketill disobeys his father and ventures to the island one evening. Here he uses the axe to slay a dragon in a *karlmannliga* fashion, as the author approvingly notes. Ketill's courage is partly assimilated to youthful ignorance—he thinks that the dragon does not look like any fish he has ever seen before—and he modestly describes it as a large salmon, a *hængr* when recounting the incident to his father. Hallbjörn subsequently bestows the nickname *hængr* on his

³⁶ *Ketils saga hængs*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1942), I, pp. 245–48. See Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Kolbítur', pp. 91–92 for brief discussion of Ketill.

³⁷ Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Kolbítur', pp. 93–94 notes that Án in *Áns saga bógsveigis* obtains a chair for his mother from a dwarf, presenting it with an identical formula.

³⁸ 'You are now young and vigorous and capable of anything, and I am getting old and stiff and incapable'.

³⁹ Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, Society', p. 11; *Ketils saga hængs*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 246.

son—the linked weapon-giving and naming topoi are particularly close to the model of heroic poetry here.⁴⁰

These two adventures mark the beginning of Ketill's acceptance of adult responsibilities; though he still sits a great deal by the fire, he now wants to go fishing with his father. Once again using reverse psychology, Hallbjörn refuses to take him. Ketill disobeys him and comes down to the shore, ahead of his father. Ketill's attempt to push the boat out fails until Hallbjörn challenges him, '*Ólíkr ertu frændum þínum, ok seint ætla ek, at afl verði í þér. En ek var vanr, áðr en ek eltumst, at setja einn ferjuna*'.⁴¹ Provoked, Ketill gives the boat such an almighty push that Hallbjörn falls out onto the pebbly foreshore. Hallbjörn sums up the situation judiciously:

'Lítt lætr þú' mik njóta frændsemi frá þér, er þú vilt brjóta bein í mér, en þat vil ek nú tala, at ek ætla, at þú sért nógu sterkur. [...] Þykki mér góð sonareign í þér.'⁴²

In the course of the expedition, Ketill is challenged by two men who want to take their catch. Ketill kills one and the other rows away in terror. When Hallbjörn, who has been minding the fishing-hut, learns what has happened, he praises his son for dealing with these two notorious outlaws. Since the first of these is called Hængr, Hallbjörn is able to joke that his son is keen on big fish and that he is truly well-named; *ok batnaði nú frændsemi þeirra* ('and now their relationship improved'). Hallbjörn has successfully managed his son's transition to adult responsibilities, through a combination of psychology, challenge and rhetorical appeal to his own advancing years. Though only eleven years old, Ketill is trusted to exercise adult autonomy from now on.

Although Víkingr of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* has nine sons, the saga-author does not investigate the potential for Œdipal clashes between older and younger generations explored in the three sagas previously discussed. This saga rather is interested in the tension between the loyalty which Víkingr feels towards his children, and the oaths he swore

⁴⁰ *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 247.

⁴¹ *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 248: 'You are not like your kinsmen, I think it will be late before you get any strength. But before I grew old, I was accustomed to getting a boat out on my own.'

⁴² 'You don't let me enjoy much benefit from our kinship, since you want to break my bones, but I will admit now that I think you are quite strong [...] it seems to me that I have a good son in you': cf. Tulinius, 'Framliðnir feður', pp. 304–05.

to King Njörvi, his neighbour and former comrade-in-arms.⁴³ In the episodes from *Egils saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Ketils saga hængs*, we have seen how greatly father and son can antagonise one other. A crisis is precipitated when the boy is of an age to make an economic contribution to the household with his labour; he performs his chores only under duress, implying that the allotted farming tasks are demeaning to him. He believes himself to be cut out for more socially highly-regarded roles, such as raiding or fighting, an aspiration which is appropriate in *fornaldarsögur* and which is plausible in the tenth-century society in which *Egils saga* is set, but which marks Grettir out as a man born too late, who cannot adapt to the demands of the eleventh-century farming family into which his formerly viking lineage has evolved. Cross-cultural psychology confirms that adolescent conflict frequently centres around such mundane matters as household chores, but in the Norse context, as Grettir and Ketill demonstrate, reluctance to perform such tasks is a proxy for identity and vocational crisis in the individual.⁴⁴ The conflicts of the sagas, in contrast to heroic poetry and its immediate derivatives, suggest real ideological issues being worked out in the period in which the sagas are composed; as Torfi Tulinius has noted, such ideological problems are often explored within the structure of the family.⁴⁵

In *Egils saga*, the adolescent's anti-social behaviour is exacerbated by his mother's support for his violent aspirations. In *Grettis saga*, Ásdís's intervention brings a temporary halt to hostilities between father and son. When Ásmundr refuses to give his son a weapon to take on his journey to Norway, Ásdís surreptitiously provides him with Jökulsnautr, her grandfather's sword.⁴⁶ This weapon, as Poole notes, is multivalent; Grettir's maternal lineage, particularly his relationship with another Jökull, his maternal uncle, links him with non-human, troll-like figures, ultimately with the Hrafnistumenn descended from Hallbjörn halftröll.⁴⁷ Although Ketill's mother is a silent presence in her son's development, Ketill explicitly invokes his *ást* for her, and not for his demanding father. His fondness for the kitchen, the feminine domestic domain, and the

⁴³ *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1942), II, p. 199.

⁴⁴ See Arnett, 'Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered'; Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, 'Nokkrar hugleiðingar'.

⁴⁵ See Tulinius, *The Matter of the North* (as in n. 19), and Dasan, 'Rapid Social Change'.

⁴⁶ *Grettis saga*, pp. 49–50.

⁴⁷ Poole, 'Myth, Psychology and Society', pp. 7–9.

gift of a well-made chair as appropriate for her to take her ease by the fire, suggests maternal attachment issues which Poole also identifies in the characterisation of Grettir.⁴⁸

Adolescence is a time of self-centredness. David Elkind has identified the 'imaginary audience' as an important psychological construct in adolescent egocentricity: the belief that everyone is watching and evaluating the young person.⁴⁹ Adolescents in Old Icelandic texts emerge into a highly gendered society, one which stakes a great deal on managing questions of face, honour and sensitivity to insult, and in which the critical audience is by no means always imaginary.⁵⁰ Crises arise when the youth has to make the transition from the contained dynamics of the family to the social world, where he joins an age-cohort of peers of similar social standing. In this environment he learns important lessons about social interaction, about loyalty, tact and the undercurrents of local politics. The ball-game (*knattleikr*) is key here; it is the territory onto which the hero first moves beyond his home, 'classically an avenue towards socialization' as Poole comments, and it usually ends in violence.⁵¹ Egill's first killing is a consequence of a *knattleikr* game, even though he is such a poor loser that everyone has told their sons to give way before him. The games are organised by age; Egill is matched against a ten or eleven-year-old boy Grímr who neglects to let him win. After a fight, Egill leaves the game, returns with a *skeggox*, lent him by his friend Þórðr and kills Grímr.⁵² This leads to a feud in which Grímr's father and uncle are killed by Óleifr *hjalti*, one of Skalla-Grímr's friends.⁵³ It looks as if the incident at the boys' games is a proxy for regional quarrels already in train; the repercussions of Egill's killing are exploited by others in a local power struggle. It may be assumed that since the feud ends with Óleifr victorious, that

⁴⁸ Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Kolbítur', pp. 93–94.

⁴⁹ See David Elkind, 'Egocentrism in Adolescence', *Child Development*, 38 (1967), 1025–34, and for a recent re-evaluation, Lesa Rae Vartanian, 'Revisiting the Imaginary Audience and Personal Fable Constructs of Adolescent Egocentrism: a Conceptual Review', *Adolescence*, 35 (2000), 639–61.

⁵⁰ Richard Bauman, 'Performance and Honor in 13th-century Iceland', *Journal of American Folklore*, 99 (1986), 131–50 (pp. 141–42); Vartanian, 'Revisiting the Imaginary Audience', p. 651.

⁵¹ Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, Society', p. 12; Martin, "'Svá lýkr hér hverju hestaðingi'".

⁵² See Callow, 'Transitions', p. 52 for insightful comments on the social status of Þórðr and his father.

⁵³ *Egils saga*, pp. 98–101.

Skalla-Grímr's interests are served by it too. Immediately after this episode the story of the games at which Skalla-Grímr almost kills Egill is narrated. Skalla-Grímr's loss of self-control and vengeful behaviour demonstrates the source of Egill's own social and behavioural difficulties as in his paternal lineage; that an adult should be ashamed of such uncontrolled aggression, especially directed towards a child, is emphasised by the critical reaction of Þorgerðr brák, discussed above.⁵⁴

The corresponding scene in *Grettis saga* matches Grettir against a certain Auðunn in the *knattleikr*. The saga provides an explicit roll-call of the prominent figures in Grettir's age cohort, indicating that there are a significant number of young men who will be jockeying for social dominance in the years to come.⁵⁵ Among these, Auðunn is said to be *gegn maðr ok góðfengr ok sterkastr norðr þar sinna jafnaldra* ('an accomplished man, good to deal with and the strongest in the north for his age'). During the games, when Auðunn lobbs the ball over his head, Grettir is incensed and thinks that Auðunn is deliberately making fun of him. First a wrestling-match, then a fight breaks out; eventually Grettir goes down and Auðunn knees him in the belly before others separate them.⁵⁶ As a consequence of this fight, Grettir kills a certain Skeggi who taunts him with his defeat; this results in his first period of outlawry spent in Norway. Here he achieves various prodigious exploits against berserks, bears and mound-dwellers. Grettir returns to Iceland, but is still unable to adapt to the farming life. Reckoning that he still has a score to settle with Auðunn, he visits his farm for a return wrestling bout. This is broken up by a friend of Auðunn.⁵⁷ The last thing Grettir does, however, before setting out to his ill-fated confrontation with Glámr, is to ride over to see Auðunn and make friends with him.⁵⁸ In this case, the local power struggle takes longer to play out. The ball-game still leads to a death, but since Skeggi is only a house-servant, it matters less, and the outlawry Grettir suffers for it establishes him as successful in the heroic terms in which he envisages himself, as a fighter and tomb-raider. Back in Iceland, one of the few good decisions Grettir makes in trying to establish himself in a district where there are too

⁵⁴ See Hansen, 'Representations', pp. 174–80 for negative evaluations of adult violence against children.

⁵⁵ *Grettis saga*, pp. 42–43.

⁵⁶ *Grettis saga*, pp. 43–44.

⁵⁷ *Grettis saga*, pp. 95–98.

⁵⁸ *Grettis saga*, p. 116.

many prominent sons for the social and physical space available, is to resolve his childish feud with Auðunn.

Ketils saga hængs substitutes a scene of competitive fishing for the *knattleikr*. A neighbour, Björn, had long made fun of Ketill, calling him the *Hrafnistuðfl* ('fool of Hrafnista'—the island where Ketill and his family live).⁵⁹ When Björn goes fishing one day, Ketill takes a boat out, too. Björn's party taunt Ketill with his bad luck at fishing, for Ketill only catches a large ling. When the fishing is over Ketill hurls his ling at Björn; it catches him on the head, making him fall overboard and sink. The incident has no particular repercussions: Björn has brought his unheroic fate upon himself by his mockery. Hallbjörn, like some of the other fathers, has little to say about his son's comic first killing.⁶⁰ It is no doubt significant that the father and son bond finally in the later fishing expedition during which Ketill not only catches a large quantity of fish by himself (*stórfang*), but kills one outlaw (Hængr) and puts another to flight.⁶¹ Although Ketill, as we have seen, scorns the routine of the farmer, he has grown into an effective fisherman and hence a provider of food to the family. In the following chapter, Ketill extends his hunting skills for the benefit of the whole community. During a famine, he determines to go out fishing alone, despite Hallbjörn's offer to accompany him. The famine, he discovers, has been caused by the depredations of a cannibal giant in a neighbouring fjord, who has been stockpiling meat and indeed human flesh. When the giant returns home and sees the destruction of his food-stores, he makes ill-advised remarks about Ketill the *eldhúsfífl* ('kitchen-fool'), implying that he had reached a *modus vivendi* with Hallbjörn, whom he regarded as a friend (*minn vinr*). Ketill quickly dispatches him with his axe. The generational shift, from the half-troll who tolerates giants dwelling in the vicinity, the old man who, as the giant notes, *sitr nú kyrr heima* ('now sits quietly at home'), to Ketill the fearless giant-slayer, is complete.⁶²

In *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, the *knattleikr* which takes place between the sons of jarl Víkingr and the sons of King Njörvi is a proxy for broader class and ideological tensions. The fathers had been allies in the past, but Njörvi has always insisted on the superiority of his royal

⁵⁹ *Ketils saga hængs*, pp. 246–7.

⁶⁰ Danielli, 'Initiation Ritual' notes the frequency with which actual bears or anti-social figures named Björn feature in the youthful adventures of saga heroes.

⁶¹ *Ketils saga hængs*, pp. 247–48.

⁶² *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 249.

rank. The two eldest sons of Víkingr are sensible and patient Þorsteinn and the impetuous and highly competitive Þórir, who respectively model untroubled and conflicted transitions to adulthood.⁶³ The eldest son of Njörvi is Jökull, promising, but arrogant, an *ofstopamaðr mikill*; his next brother, Óláfr is even worse. When playing games, as Víkingr advises, the brothers habitually hold back and let the kings' sons win, until one day, during a match, Þórir strikes the *knött* well over Óláfr's head. Óláfr becomes angry and thinks that Þórir is deliberately making fun of him (*þótti Þórir gera leik til sín*). At the end of the match Óláfr starts a fight by striking Þórir with the *knatttré* ('club'); Þorsteinn and other men intervene to separate them. Jökull makes matters worse by making light of the injury Þórir has received, with the result that as everyone is going home, Þórir doubles back, follows the king's sons back to their hall and kills Óláfr.

Víkingr is not pleased by his son's behaviour; he claims to have foreseen that Þórir would kill one of the king's sons, and orders him to leave home for ever, emphasising that his son's impetuosity has made Víkingr into an oath-breaker as far as the king is concerned.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, when Þorsteinn declares that all the brothers will share Þórir's fate, Víkingr devises a plan for them to take refuge on a nearby island and, significantly, bequeaths to Þorsteinn a valuable sword, *Angrvaðill*, which ensures victory. Víkingr also concedes, as he says farewell to his sons, that despite the blame which Þórir must bear, his offence was *nokkurr fyrir karlmennsku sakir* ('somewhat for the sake of manliness').⁶⁵ The path to manhood is affected both by local political conditions as well as by (in this instance) the positive family dynamic.

What has this brief survey of family sagas and *fornaldarsögur* shown us? Firstly, that the sagas offer a more-or-less realistic view of youthful behaviour, with features recognisable in modern psychological constructions of adolescence. Secondly, that the Ædipal conflicts of emotional alienation and family strife in the family dynamics are partly rooted in personality, but also derive from anxieties about identity and vocational choice in a society in transition. The saga-adolescent forges a social

⁶³ *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 203–04.

⁶⁴ *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, pp. 204–06.

⁶⁵ *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, p. 205.

persona for himself in the boys' *knattleikr*, a microcosm of the social world in which he has to learn negotiate both defeat and success, and in which the (non)-imaginary audience scrutinises and evaluates him. Once this stage has been negotiated, the young man is free to embark on the adventures which constitute an informal rite of passage: leaving home to go raiding, to visit Norway, to journey to the Alþingi, or to exterminate the local giant population.

The adolescent theme is treated distinctively in the different sagas, and it is by no means the case that the *fornaldarsögur* are less psychological than the family sagas. For all that Ketill *hængr* engages with dragons rather than troublesome boys, he still has to prove to his neighbour that *kolbíttr* and *fiðl* are not synonymous. The father-son relationship is treated with acute psychological insight in this saga, as Hallbjörn learns how to manage his son and to recognise his worth. Ketill himself struggles to achieve self-realisation; he does not want to be a farm manager, but once he gains his father's approval, he becomes a valued member of the community as fisherman and giant-slayer. Percivall (this volume) argues that in the *samtíðarsögur* boys with living fathers (and who, unlike Skalla-Grímr and Ásmundr, take a positive interest in their sons) manage a healthy, phased transition to adulthood; so Ketill achieves a mature masculine social role aided by his father's understanding. Þorsteinn's good sense, deriving from his father's political *nous*, almost averts the anticipated clash between the rival clans of brothers. Grettir's rebellions are petty and cruel, but at least he has the sense in adulthood to mend his quarrel with Auðunn. Egill remains the psychologically unbalanced man his prodigious childhood foreshadows, but it is possible that his mother's loving support set him up for positive relations with a number of other women throughout the saga.⁶⁶ There is much more to be said about adolescence in the sagas: the personality traits which are often specified by the saga author as the character is introduced, and are thereafter not to be changed, would repay investigation as would notions of genetic inheritance, clearly evidenced in Egill's lineage or

⁶⁶ See Torfi Tulinius, 'Le statut théologique d'Egill Skalla-Grímsson', in *Hugur: Mélanges d'histoire, de littérature et de mythologie offerts à Régis Boyer pour son soixante-cinquième anniversaire*, ed. by Claude Lecouteux and Olivier Gouchet (Paris, 1997), pp. 279–88 and Ármann Jakobsson, 'Ástin á tímum þjóðveldisins', in *Míðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2005), pp. 63–86 (pp. 71–75).

the implications of naming.⁶⁷ Nevertheless it is suggestive how far the kinds of analyses of adolescence offered by contemporary developmental and social psychologists foregrounding issues of self-realisation, egocentricity, anxiety about social status, problematic intra-family ties and delinquent behaviour, are consonant with the saga world's realisation of the transition from boy to man.

⁶⁷ The alteration in Hrafnkell's character—if the frequent editorial emendation from *land* to *lund* is correct—is flagged up for its exceptionalism. For naming, see Hansen, 'Representations', pp. 72–81.

‘SPOILING THEM ROTTEN?’:
GRANDMOTHERS AND FAMILIAL IDENTITY IN
TWELFTH- AND THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ICELAND

Philadelphia Ricketts

In Iceland in 1202 Þuríðr Gizurardóttir offered to foster her favoured daughter’s eldest son, Tumi Sighvatsson, who was four.* *Íslendinga saga* tells us that Þuríðr and her second husband Sigurðr Ormsson loved the boy very much.¹ There is concrete evidence of their care and concern for Tumi: a few years later, Tumi’s foster-father Sigurðr was given some chieftaincies, which he transferred to his foster-son Tumi.²

Tumi was not Þuríðr’s only grandchild to live with her and Sigurðr. Her younger son Arnórr’s two daughters were also living at her residence in 1203 while they were very young.³ It seems that Arnórr was still less than twenty-one, was married and was living elsewhere, although he was often with his stepfather Sigurðr. From the wording of the saga, it is clear that Sigurðr was acting very like a father and mentor. His elder stepson Kolbeinn was already a chieftain, and Sigurðr and Þuríðr had done all they could to further Kolbeinn’s power and prestige.⁴ Sigurðr was now training his younger stepson, Arnórr, for the role of chieftain as well.⁵ It is possible that Þuríðr had taken in Arnórr’s young daughters and her young grandson Tumi in an effort to continue her role as mentor to following generations, while her son Arnórr’s training continued with her husband and elder son.

So what does this information tell us about Þuríðr as grandmother and her identity as such, that is, about Þuríðr’s sense of herself as a

* Many thanks to Professor Pauline Stafford and Dr Nic Percivall for helpful discussion, advice and comments.

¹ *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson et al., 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), I, p. 239, ch. 13. (Hereafter cited as SS.)

² SS, I, p. 243, ch. 18.

³ SS, I, pp. 243–44, ch. 19.

⁴ SS, I, pp. 155–57, ch. 28; p. 164, ch. 3; pp. 234–35, ch. 6; p. 239, ch. 13. For a discussion of this point, see Philadelphia Ricketts, ‘Property, Power and Identity: a Study of Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Widows in Iceland and Yorkshire’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Liverpool, 2004), pp. 160–61.

⁵ SS, I, pp. 237–38, ch. 11; pp. 247–49, ch. 21; p. 254, ch. 25.

grandmother and the importance of that role to her? First, it shows that Þuríðr and her second husband actively promoted the material interests of at least one grandson. Second, it seems to show that her household acted as a focal point for her grandchildren, both sons' and daughters' children, or at least for some of them for a part of their lives. Third, it strongly suggests that Þuríðr felt a bond with some of her grandchildren, which was perhaps intensified by their communal residence. One major question that this vignette raises, however, is, 'Was Þuríðr a typical medieval Icelandic grandmother, typical in her concern for her grandchildren, in their residence with her, and in her involvement in their upbringing and their futures?'

The question is not, perhaps, as straightforward as one might anticipate. In this article, associations and contact between grandmothers and their grandchildren in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland (i.e., the later Commonwealth period) will be examined. But, as Joel Rosenthal has noted, links between members of the first and third generations are hard to track and assess for the medieval period, especially in relation to grandmothers.⁶ To determine interaction and affection—and thus a grandmother's family role, her identity and personal bonds with grandchildren—is often even more difficult. Furthermore, the historiography of medieval grandmothers is very limited. Apart from Rosenthal's useful contributions, no other substantial work has been undertaken on the subject, and no work has been carried out on medieval Icelandic grandmothers.

That is not to say that grandmothers and their contribution to family and society were unimportant. There are many reasons why these women and their familial role are hard to identify, not least due to the types of sources available, the kinds of activities which the women were involved in, and the interests of those who recorded events. We are particularly fortunate when examining grandmothers in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, at least in comparison with other regions. The main source which provides an insight into Icelandic society of the later Commonwealth period is the contemporary sagas. As a reasonably

⁶ Joel T. Rosenthal, 'Three-Generation Families: Searching for Grandpa and Grandma in Late Medieval England', in *Medieval Family Roles: a Book of Essays*, ed. by Cathy Jorgensen Imyre (New York, 1996), pp. 224–37; Joel T. Rosenthal, 'Looking For Grandmother: The Pastons and their Counterparts in Late Medieval England', in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. by John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, *The New Middle Ages*, 3 (New York, 1996), pp. 259–77 (pp. 259–60).

comprehensive group of political and social narratives written within ten to seventy years of the events they record, they are generally accepted as a fairly reliable record of twelfth- and thirteenth-century aristocratic life in Iceland.⁷ These sagas are more concerned with grandmothers and their activities than many other sources of the period are, precisely because of their nature. The sagas are best characterized as a political history of a few powerful aristocratic families followed closely over several generations, but with particular detail in relation to their social setting.⁸ Such intense interest on families and households is likely to make this source concerned with issues such as grandparents and their role within the family.

Number of Grandmothers

Some family connections, such as those found in genealogies, can often provide information which allows us to give a rough estimate of the numbers of women who lived to see their grandchildren. However, this number can never be more than an estimate. Most medieval sources are sparse, fragmentary and ambiguous, and in many cases they are focused mainly on eldest sons and their sons.⁹ Even in the case of the more complete contemporary sagas for Commonwealth Iceland, the birth or death dates of grandmothers and most of their grandchildren are seldom recorded. It is therefore difficult to determine how many of their lives overlapped; frequently information meant for other purposes, such as residence of grandmothers and grandchildren, or gifts from the former to the latter, must be used to refine the estimate. However, these women and many of their grandchildren play little part in the main action of the sagas. At best, the sagas only notice them briefly at very specific points in their lives, and only in connection with specific events or actions. Many grandmothers are likely to have lived to see and perhaps even interact with a grandchild without leaving any record.

⁷ For a discussion of the usefulness and limitations of the contemporary sagas, see Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 33–39; Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), pp. 31–35; Jesse L. Byock, 'The Age of the Sturlungs', in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages, A Symposium*, ed. by Elisabeth Vestergaard (Odense, 1986), pp. 27–42 (pp. 29–31); Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), pp. 175–76.

⁸ Byock, 'Age of the Sturlungs', p. 31; Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 35–6.

⁹ Rosenthal, 'Three-Generation Families', pp. 227–28.

The total number of Icelandic women in the contemporary sagas is too large to examine as a whole. Therefore, for this article, the group has been narrowed to the forty-seven whose families I have already reconstructed for a study of Icelandic widows.¹⁰ Among this forty-seven, five had no children, and thus only forty-two were potential grandmothers (Table 1).¹¹ Of these, eight were certainly alive when grandchildren were born (19%). Seven potential grandmothers reached an age (at least fifty) that was sufficiently old for their children to have reproduced, and/or had married children who might already have reproduced, although there is no direct evidence that a grandchild was born before their death (17%). It is probable that these seven women's lives also overlapped with at least one grandchild. Only one woman had definitely died before a grandchild was born (2%). Two others had probably died, and there is reason to suspect that a third might have been dead (7%). Of the remaining twenty-three, there is too little information to know if a woman lived to see a grandchild. It is difficult to assess the situation for many of these women, because the sagas do not record their date of death. The last we hear of these women is during a significant, saga-worthy event in which they were involved. It is by no means unlikely that many, or even most, of the women lived beyond this date. This is especially true for the three women who lived at the very beginning of the saga record when less information is available generally, and for the thirteen women whose marriages took place in the 1220s or later, only a generation or less before the end of the action in the contemporary sagas in 1264. It is likely that many of these women lived well beyond the date of events recorded in the sagas. They and any grandchildren they might have had were of no concern to the saga authors. The former three and their families were only mentioned in relation to how their lives impacted on other, more influential, men and chieftains. For the latter thirteen, there was no need even to record a grandchild's existence, since any saga-worthy actions he or she might have taken would have been well after the end of the saga narrative in 1264.

¹⁰ For a discussion of family reconstruction, as well as how it was achieved for these women, see Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 272–378, especially in the key to appendices (pp. 272–75), appendix 1 (pp. 276–85), appendices 5–6 (pp. 307–15), and the genealogies (pp. 366–78).

¹¹ Table 1 provides a list of the forty-two potential grandmothers in this article, grouped according to the likelihood that their lives overlapped with a grandchild. For full details of these women, see Appendix 1.

Table 1. Potential grandmothers.

Definitely alive when at least one grandchild was born

Hallbera Einarasdóttir, Guðný Böðvarsdóttir, Þuríður Gizurardóttir, Þóra Guðmundardóttir, Halldóra Tumadóttir, Ósk Þorvarðsdóttir, Solveig Sæmundardóttir, Jóriður Hallsdóttir

Probably alive (and age at death if known)

Yngvildr Þorgilsdóttir (59+), Úlfheiður Gunnarsdóttir (54–76), Þuríður Sturludóttir (51+), Ásdís Sigmundardóttir (alive 1221, eldest daughters had children by mid-1220s at latest and probably earlier), Steinunn Hrafnisdóttir (alive 1242, eldest daughter married 1240), Álfheiður Njálisdóttir (alive 1251, son married 1249 and grandson born by 1252), Jórunn Kálfsdóttir (48–59 in 1259 when son married)

Definitely not alive

Ingibjörg Þorgeirsdóttir

Probably not alive

Álof Þorgeirsdóttir, Hallveig Ormsdóttir, Guðrún Bjarnadóttir

Too little information to determine survival

Björg, Hallbera Snorrardóttir, Yngvildr Þórðardóttir, Kolfinna Hallsdóttir, Þóra Þorgeirsdóttir, Guðný Þorvarðsdóttir, Ingibjörg Guðmundardóttir, Kolfinna Gizurardóttir, Arnþrúður Fornadóttir, Vilborg Gizurardóttir, Herdís Hrafnisdóttir, Þuríður Ormsdóttir, Steinunn Brandsdóttir, Þórhildr Gíslsdóttir, Þórdís Snorrardóttir, Randalín Filippusdóttir, Vilborg sister of Órækja, Oddný Halldórsdóttir, Ingunn Sturludóttir, Arnríður Bjarnadóttir, Ingibjörg Sturludóttir, Ingibjörg, Eirný Halldórsdóttir

Although the sample is fairly small (forty-two women), the figures compare favourably with those used by other medievalists examining the overlapping of the first and third generations. In Iceland, we know that at least 19% of women in the sample lived to see a grandchild, and a further 17% probably did. Only one woman (2%) certainly did not live to see her grandchildren, while only a further 7% can be said with some certainty not to have reached this life stage. Even in the unlikely event that all twenty-three women about whom too little information exists died before their grandchildren were born, the 36% of women whose lives probably overlapped with grandchildren is a sizable percentage. If we expand the sample to include the childless widows, the percentage of women who lived or probably lived to see a grandchild born was still high—32% (17% and 15%, respectively). And the percentage

of those who definitely or probably did not live to see grandchildren is still fairly low—19% (13% and 6%, respectively). Compared with Rosenthal's bare minimum estimate of one-in-ten, it would appear that an Icelandic grandmother's chances (roughly one-in-three) of living to see her grandchildren was better than her counterparts in later medieval England.¹²

However, it must be remembered that this group of women was initially chosen for family reconstruction because they were widows. They had already outlived at least one husband and perhaps as a result had a longer average life span than both men and women of their time. When compared with Rosenthal's figures from the English inquisitions *post mortem* of widows passing on inheritance for the last decade of the fourteenth century and the early years of the fifteenth, the difference is negligible: 40% of these widowed mothers, compared with at least 36% of widowed Icelandic mothers, died when their children were of an age to be likely to have children of their own already.¹³ Although both groups are small (Rosenthal's figures comprise only ninety widows), and despite the difference in geography and period, the similarity for the minimum percent of probable overlap between grandmothers and grandchildren is striking. This apparent similarity might be given more weight if one considers David Herlihy's article on the generation in medieval history. Herlihy notes the close correlation between J.C. Russell's figures for life expectancy of royal princes in later medieval England and his own for Florentine burghers, who were 'far removed socially and geographically from the English princes'.¹⁴ Perhaps life expectancy in the medieval period was not so disparate between regions and social groups that it affected the average percentage of population who could expect to see a grandchild born.

¹² Rosenthal, 'Three-Generation Families', p. 232; Joel T. Rosenthal, 'When Did you Last See your Grandfather?', in *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Rowena E. Archer (Stroud, 1995), pp. 223–44 (p. 242). For a discussion and calculation of medieval life expectancy and adult mortality rates, see Josiah Cox Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, NM, 1948), pp. 174–88, 195–207.

¹³ Rosenthal, 'When Did you Last See your Grandfather?', p. 232.

¹⁴ David Herlihy, 'The Generation in Medieval History', *Viator*, 5 (1974), 347–64 (pp. 351–2).

Naming Patterns

Little, if any, work has been done on first names and naming patterns in medieval Iceland.¹⁵ On the other hand, there is a small, but growing, corpus of work on first names in northern Europe during the Middle Ages. Much of this scholarship focuses on the cultural and social influences that led to changes in naming patterns. Some scholars concentrate largely on etymology, orthography and phonology, only touching briefly on ethnicity,¹⁶ while others are more interested in contact between disparate ethnic and social groups to explain differences in personal names.¹⁷ Cecily Clark combines the two approaches.¹⁸ Such work is not relevant to the discussion of Icelandic material in this article, since migration from and contact with non-Scandinavian countries in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland was too inconsequential to have an impact on aristocratic naming patterns. However, the debate concerning whether names have acted as kinship markers, or whether an infant's principal godparent bestowed his or her own name on the child at baptism, is relevant. Philip Niles has stated for the later Middle Ages that many 'medievalists have too readily assumed [...] that families maintained Christian names to identify lineage and dynasty', arguing that 'in England Christian names indicate little about family relationships because parents usually did not select the names of their

¹⁵ This section expands on work in Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 212–18. Apart from my own work in my doctoral thesis, I have not been able to locate any material on first names or naming patterns for medieval Iceland.

¹⁶ See, for example, John Insley, 'The Scandinavian Personal Names in the Later Part of the Durham *Liber Vitae*', in *The Durham Liber Vitae and its Context*, ed. by David Rollason et al. (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 87–96; Gillian Fellows-Jensen, *The Vikings and their Victims: the Verdict of the Names*, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lectures in Northern Studies (London, 1995); *idem*, 'Some Orkney Personal Names', in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, ed. by Colleen E. Batey et al. (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 397–407; Brian Ó Cuív, 'Personal Names as an Indicator of Relations between Native Irish and Settlers in the Viking Period', in *Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland: Studies Presented to F.X. Martin, OSA*, ed. by John Bradley (Kilkenny, 1988), pp. 79–88.

¹⁷ Matthew Hammond, 'Ethnicity, Personal Names and the Nature of Scottish Europeanization', in *Thirteenth Century England XI: Proceedings of the Gregynog Conference, 2005*, ed. by Björn K.U. Weiler et al. (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 82–94; Stephanie Mooers Christelow, 'Names and Ethnicity in Anglo-Norman England', in *Studies on the Personal Name in Later Medieval England and Wales*, ed. by Dave Postles and Joel T. Rosenthal, (Kalamazoo, MI, 2006), pp. 341–71.

¹⁸ Cecily Clark, 'English Personal Names ca. 650–1300: Some Prosopographical Bearings', in *Studies on the Personal Name*, pp. 7–28 (first publ. in *Medieval Prosopography*, 8, 1 (Spring 1987), 31–60); *idem*, 'Battle c. 1110: An Anthroponymist Looks at an Anglo-Norman New Town', *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies*, 2 (1979), 21–41.

children. Godparents did.¹⁹ Yet other scholars contend that names were connected with kinship. For example, Constance Bouchard has examined the migration of women's names between lineages in ninth- to twelfth-century France.²⁰ She noticed that royal daughters were at first named nearly exclusively for their paternal kin. But as the names filtered down the social scale, the pool of available female names broadened to include those of maternal kin, especially when maternal kin were descended from royalty. Bouchard's study on seven personal female names in the upper nobility demonstrates how these names were passed from one family to another, in some instances almost certainly due to kinship. Dave Postles has also noted that 'there is some evidence of a *nomen* associated with lineage in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries'.²¹ He suggests that some families named a son after the ancestor who brought an enhanced social position to the kin group.²² Their view of first names as kinship markers, rather than Niles' assertion that names were given by godparents, is more applicable to Iceland. The evidence for Commonwealth Iceland strongly suggests that parents, not godparents, named their children at birth, and that these names could indeed be kinship markers.²³

Therefore, first names might be useful in a study of grandmothers and familial identity, as a valuable source of associations within a family. An examination of the incidence of names shared by close female relations could illuminate how frequently a name echoed that of a kinswoman,

¹⁹ Philip Niles, 'Baptism and the Naming of Children in Late Medieval England', in *Studies on the Personal Name*, pp. 147–57 (147) (first publ. in *Medieval Prosopography*, 3, 1 (Spring 1982), 95–107). For a similar view, see also Michael J. Bennett, 'Spiritual Kinship and the Baptismal Name in Traditional European Society', in *Studies on the Personal Name*, pp. 115–46 (first publ. in *Principalities, Power and Estates*, ed. L.O. Frappell (Adelaide, 1979), pp. 1–13).

²⁰ Constance B. Bouchard, 'Patterns of Women's Names in Royal Lineages, Ninth–Eleventh Centuries', *Medieval Prosopography*, 9, 1 (Spring 1988), 1–32; *idem*, 'The Migration of Women's Names in the Upper Nobility, Ninth–Twelfth Centuries', *Medieval Prosopography*, 9, 2 (Autumn 1988), 1–19.

²¹ Dave Postles, 'Identity and Identification: Some Recent Research into the English Medieval "Forename"', in *Studies on the Personal Name*, pp. 29–62 (49).

²² I have noticed a similar approach to naming among the Clare family in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In this case the names used were Richard and that of his wife Rohaise, who were probably members of the founding generation at the time of the Norman Conquest. These names might have been used to link descendants to the ancestors who established the family's landed fortunes in England. Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', p. 215.

²³ See, for example, the cases of Gizurr Þorvaldsson (*SS*, I, ch. 22, p. 250) and Ormr Ormsson. (*SS*, II, ch. 3, p. 89).

whether there was a general preference for paternal or maternal kin when naming girls, and which relatives appear to be singled out in this manner most often. A closer examination of a few case studies allows us to explore individual emphasis on status, affection or honour. Although this article is predominantly concerned with grandmothers and their identity within the family in this role, it will be instructive to compare names shared by a woman and her grandmother with those shared by a woman and other close female relations. While a woman's name might tell us more about an association between the parent who conferred it and his or her own mother, than about any immediate connection between grandmother and granddaughter at the time of naming, this link might also instil a desire in grandmother and granddaughter to foster a connection over time. Furthermore, the fact that a father or mother named a daughter after his or her mother might indicate the role that the grandmother played, or was expected to play, within the extended family. It might imply how close or important she was to her child's kin group, both natal and marital—either physically through residence, emotionally through affection, or in a social sense through her wealth, power or status. A comparison of names shared between a woman and her close kin, that is, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts and great-aunts, can shed light on the significance of the role of grandmothers within the wider context of female relations. It might also help indicate the importance of specific kinship connections in later Commonwealth Iceland, not only between the woman and these relations, but also between the woman's parent—who conferred her name on her—and that parent's close female kin, that is, mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts.

Much information exists in the contemporary sagas relating to naming patterns in Commonwealth Iceland. The sagas have extensive genealogies, containing men and women related by both birth and marriage, which make tracing family connections across generations fairly reliable. Yet although Icelandic genealogies are generally very comprehensive, not all near relations of many of the women in this study are known. There is little reason to doubt that some genealogies, at least, are complete. Frequently, children, including girls, from important families are named, even when they play no role elsewhere in the sagas. However, some genealogies are obviously incomplete. Often, a man or woman whose family had recently become wealthy or gained power would have an incomplete genealogy, especially for earlier generations. Moving from the systematic genealogies to more incidental information

in the sagas, the situation is even more problematic. When a particular person important to the saga action is mentioned, parentage might or might not be, and siblings, unless likewise important, probably are not. Thus, where a daughter is not known to have shared a name with a close kinwoman, it is still possible that she did. It would therefore be wise to consider the following analysis with this in mind. The figures represent the least number of women connected by nomenclature to a close female relation.

Before embarking on an analysis of female names, it is worth noting that it was rare for a child to be named for a parent in Commonwealth Iceland. Of the thousands of names in the contemporary sagas, as few as nine fathers and sons, and only one mother and daughter, appear to have shared a name.²⁴ In the case of the mother/daughter pair, Steinunn Þorsteinsdóttir and her mother Steinunn Bjarnadóttir, the name Steinunn might have been given to the daughter not because it was her mother's name, but because it was her paternal grandmother's name (Steinunn Bergsdóttir). Name-giving appears to have emphasized links outside the conjugal unit, possibly to wider kin, the politically powerful, the wealthy, or where these combined.

Of the forty-two women examined as potential grandmothers in this article, we know the names of grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts or great-aunts of thirty-two of them. Of these thirty-two, at least eleven shared a name with one or more close female relation. Five shared with a grandmother; three with a great-grandmother; five with an aunt; and one with a great-aunt. (Three shared a name with more than one kinswoman.) Twenty-four of the forty-two women are known to have had daughters, fifty-two of whose names are known.²⁵ Of the twenty-four, the close relations of three of the women (Björg, Yngvildr Þórðardóttir, Þórhildr Gíslsdóttir) and their husbands are not recorded; consequently there is insufficient information concerning their six daughters to distinguish naming patterns. Nine further daughters have been

²⁴ The male pairs are Bjarni Flosason and son Bjarni Bjarnason, Guðmundr Eyjólfsson *inn haltí* and son Guðmundr Guðmundarson, Þórðr Sturluson and son Þórðr *tíggi* Þórðarson, Þórðr *kakali* Sighvatsson and son Þórðr Þórðarson, Ormr Jónsson Svinfellingr and son Ormr Ormsson, Oddr Álason and son Oddr Oddsson, Eyjólfir Kársson and son Eyjólfir Eyjólfsson, Snorri husband of Arnþrúðr Fornadóttir and son Snorri Snorrason, and Halldórr Þórarinnsson á Hóli and son Halldórr Halldórsson.

²⁵ Two of Þórdís Snorradóttir's three daughters are not named in the sagas.

removed from the fifty-two.²⁶ Of the thirty-seven daughters remaining, we know enough of the grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts and great aunts of these daughters to establish that at least twenty of these daughters shared a name with at least one of these female relations. Seven shared with a grandmother; eight with a great-grandmother; five with an aunt; and five with a great-aunt. (Five females shared with two or more relatives.) Thus, there are sixty-nine women overall about whom enough is known of at least one close female relation of her mother or father to begin to observe naming patterns. Of this sixty-nine, thirty-one (45%) shared a name with a parent's mother, grandmother, sister and/or aunt. Twelve of the thirty-one women (39%) shared with a grandmother (her mother's or father's mother); eleven (35%) with a great-grandmother (her mother's or father's grandmother); ten (32%) with an aunt (her mother's or father's sister); and six (19%) with a great-aunt (her mother's or father's aunt). These figures represent 17%, 16%, 14% and 9%, respectively, of the overall group of sixty-nine women. The women who shared a name with more than one relative most often shared with a great-grandmother and another relative; two shared with a grandmother, three with an aunt (one of whom also shared her name with two of her great-grandmothers) and one with a great-aunt. Two further women shared a name with an aunt and a great-aunt.

Since the number of women examined here is not extensive, interpretation must remain provisional. Nevertheless, some tendencies emerge. The figures suggest that thirty-one, or a little under half (45%), of all women in the group of sixty-nine shared a name with a close kinswoman, and there is no reason to believe that this group is not representative of aristocratic Icelandic females as a whole. It is often unclear what the name given to the other thirty-eight women (55%) signified. Most of the sixty-nine names were in regular use during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Iceland, although a fair number of the women

²⁶ There is no information concerning the relations of Álof Þorsteinsdóttir or her husband, and thus insufficient information concerning her daughter, Guðleif, by that husband to consider her here. However, Álof had four further daughters with a man whose relations are known, and they are included in the figures below. Eight of the fifty-two daughters (Þóra Þorgeirsdóttir, Ingibjörg Þorgeirsdóttir, Yngvildr Þorgilsdóttir, Þuríðr Sturludóttir, Ósk Þorvarðsdóttir, Jörunn Kálfisdóttir, Ingunn Sturludóttir, Halldóra Tumadóttir), are among the forty-two women examined as potential grandmothers. To prevent these women from being counted twice, they have been included above among the forty-two potential grandmothers, but not here among the fifty-two daughters.

(18, or 26%) had uncommon or rare, even unique, names.²⁷ Only one woman, Solveig Sæmundardóttir, had a name that was unusual and found among her kinswomen, and seven women's names were unique in the contemporary sagas (Úlfheiðr, Arnþrúðr, Ósk, Ásdís, Randalín, Jóra, Ríkiza). It therefore seems that naming a daughter after a kinswoman was the most prevalent practice, although it is possible that some shared names do not denote a connection, and that choosing an unusual name was also common, albeit less so. That more women shared a name with a grandmother than any other female relative suggests that a grandmother's place within the family was significant, although other close female relations, notably great-grandmothers and aunts, also appear important according to naming patterns. What this suggests is that parents seem more inclined to have named a daughter after their own mother, grandmother or sister than for wealthy or influential women outside their kin or to have chosen an unusual name unconnected with their family. It might be unwise to read too much more into these figures without closer scrutiny of individual cases, for two reasons. First, we cannot know for certain how many of these women were named after relatives, although in some cases it seems likely. Second, a large number of the women, eight or 28%, shared a name with more than one kinswoman, and it is not often clear which relative, if either, was the one honoured by the parents who named a daughter similarly.

If these figures are broken down to show how many names were shared by maternal and paternal kinswomen, an interesting pattern emerges. Due to sharing a name with more than one relative, the thirty-one women had the same nomenclature as thirty-nine kinswomen.²⁸ Of this thirty-nine, fifteen (38%) were maternal and twenty-four (62%) were paternal. Of the twelve grandmothers, there were five (42%) and seven (58%) of each, respectively. Of the eleven great-grandmothers, there were four (36%) and seven (64%); of the ten aunts, three (30%) and seven (70%); and of the six great-aunts, three (50%) and three (50%). Thus, although there is an overall preference for paternal kin,

²⁷ See Appendix 1 for details.

²⁸ Because it cannot often be determined for which of two (or in one case three) relatives a woman was named, every relation is considered as having the honour of being named after in these statistics, even when one is from the paternal side and one from the maternal. Therefore, some women are counted among the statistics more than once.

among grandmothers and great-aunts it is slight, and even among great-grandmothers and aunts maternal kin are well represented. Such an emphasis on links with maternal kin, and a near equality between maternal and paternal kin among some of the closest relations (grandmothers and great-aunts) in relation to naming, is not unexpected among twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic families, given the importance of the bilateral nature of the kinship system.²⁹

Comparing the sixty-nine women and their names with those of the fifty-eight sons of the widows, interesting differences emerge. Thirty-six sons, or 62%, shared a name with a close kinsman (grandfather, great-grandfather, uncle or great-uncle), higher than the thirty-one women, or 45%, who shared a name with a relative. Eighteen shared with a grandfather (50%), sixteen with a great-grandfather (44%), thirteen with an uncle (36%), and only two with a great-uncle (6%). Of the eleven sons who shared a name with more than one relative, ten shared with an uncle and a great-grandfather, one of whom also shared with a grandfather and a second great-grandfather. The eleventh shared with an uncle and a great-uncle. Boys most often shared a name with a grandfather, as girls most often shared with a grandmother. But unlike the girls and their aunts and great-grandmothers, a boy sharing with a great-grandfather was somewhat more common than with an uncle, and great-uncles hardly feature.

Like the women's names, most of the fifty-eight male names were in common use in the Commonwealth period, yet there was still a fair number that were uncommon or rare (13, or 22%). Unlike the women's names, however, nine of the men with uncommon names shared that name with a close kinsman. Also unlike the women, of the twenty-two sons who did not bear a name found elsewhere among their kin, only four had unusual names (Klemet, Svertingr, Dufgus, Sæmundr), and only one of the fifty-eight had a name that was unique in the sagas (Dufgus). It therefore seems likely that naming a son for a kinsman, especially for a grandfather, was the most common occurrence, and choosing an uncommon name from outside the kin group was not as likely among sons as daughters. It is surely significant that of the thirty-six

²⁹ For a discussion of Icelandic kinship structures, see Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, 'Kvinner og "krigsmenn": kjønnesstilling i det islandske samfunnet på 1100- og 1200-tallet' (unpublished MPhil thesis, University of Bergen, 1990), pp. 15–17; Stephen B. Barlau, 'Old Icelandic Kinship Terminology: an Anomaly', *Ethnology*, 20, 2 (1981), 191–202 (pp. 191–92); Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 45–58 (pp. 57–58).

men who shared a name with kin, twenty-four of those relatives were chieftains (twelve chieftain grandfathers) and one was a bishop. It appears that the combination of close male kin and power through a chieftaincy had an important bearing on choice of names for a son, so that male family names tended to come down generations with more regularity than female ones.

The thirty-six sons who shared a name with a relative did so with forty-nine kinsmen. Of the forty-nine, twenty (41%) were maternal, and twenty-nine (59%) were paternal. These figures are similar to those of the women. When broken down further, among grandfathers and uncles the division is nearly equal—eight (44%) maternal and ten (56%) paternal grandfathers, and six (46%) maternal and seven (54%) paternal uncles. Paternal great-grandfathers fare somewhat better than maternal—ten (62%) and six (38%), respectively—and both great-uncles were paternal. These figures are not that different from those for women's names, suggesting that the high proportion of women's names shared with maternal kin was not due to those names being feminine. On the whole there seems to have been a fair number of names coming through both maternal and paternal kin among the Icelandic elite, for men as well as women.

When giving a daughter a name shared with a close relative, maternal relations were frequently chosen. In my earlier comparative study, it was found that while the pattern of the same female names appeared over several generations in Yorkshire, there was no comparable pattern in Iceland. In addition, male and female names shared by grandparents and grandchildren in Yorkshire tended to follow the male and female line, respectively. Sons, almost invariably first-born, were named for paternal grandfathers, and first-born daughters were named for maternal grandmothers. Such a pattern suggests a strong emphasis on lineal descent, especially where inheritance was concerned.³⁰ But it is unsurprising that this pattern is not found in Iceland. The land market was fluid, children often inherited some land held by their kin group for a generation or less and there was little notion of a patrimony. The larger pool of names within Icelandic families from generation to generation, as well as the high frequency of unusual or unique names among

³⁰ Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 214–16. Dave Postles also notes a connection between first names, patrilinearity and inheritance. See D.A. Postles, 'Personal Naming Patterns of Peasants and Burgesses in Late Medieval England', *Medieval Prosopography*, 12, 1 (Spring 1991), 29–56.

the women in this study, suggests a more personal nature to naming, perhaps made possible by a kinship system with significant bilateral tendencies. By placing emphasis on both maternal and paternal kin, a wider group of people for whom a child could be named emerges. Such a system allows for more choice among names, and perhaps the choice of a name therefore matters more. If so, within kin, and possibly between kin and other links, prestige, power and personal associations of individual kin members may play a larger role.

A few individual cases from the grandmothers in this article support this view. For example, Guðný Böðvarsdóttir's elder daughter shared a name with her mother's mother. Guðný's family was more prestigious than her husband's, being descended from none other than the famous Icelander Egill Skalla-Grímsson.³¹ It was perhaps in recognition of this higher status that a maternal kinswoman's name was chosen. However, Guðný's second daughter bore her paternal grandmother's name, perhaps because her husband, although from less prestigious kin with fewer chieftains among them, was himself an up-and-coming chieftain whose power was rapidly increasing. A connection to this side of her kin would also benefit any daughter of Guðný. Of course, such choice in names might also be a way in which both Guðný and her husband wished to honour or commemorate their own mothers. These methods of choosing names are not mutually exclusive; one name might fulfil several purposes.

Another woman whose daughters shared a name with maternal kin was Þuríðr Gizurardóttir. Halldóra, Þuríðr's elder daughter, bore her maternal aunt's name; Álfheiðr, Þuríðr's other daughter, shared with her maternal grandmother. Þuríðr's husband's family was probably as powerful as her own, but that power was more recent than that of her kin, and, like Guðný's, Þuríðr's lineage was more distinguished. On her father's side, Þuríðr was the great-great-granddaughter of Ísleifr Gizurarson, Iceland's first bishop, and her mother was descended from Guðmundr *ríki*, an influential chieftain known for his skill as a powerful advocate and power broker.³² These connections, and/or perhaps filial and sisterly affection (although there is no evidence of this), might have prompted Þuríðr to press for names from her natal kin for her daughters. Interestingly, both Þuríðr's sons shared names with paternal

³¹ *SS*, II, *ættskrár* 13 and 19.

³² Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, pp. 105–06.

relations, the elder with his father's father, and the younger with his father's brother. As there appears to have been no pattern to naming in Iceland (e.g., sons for paternal kin and daughters for maternal, vice versa, or all children for one parent's relations), the naming of sons for paternal kin and daughters for maternal might have been one way in which important bilateral ties could be demonstrated and exploited.

The opposite could also apply. Daughters might be named for paternal kin and sons for maternal. Such was the case with Úlfheiðr Gunnarsdóttir and Ari Þorgeirsson. Their daughter Guðrún shared her name with a paternal great-aunt, and their son Gunnarr shared his with his maternal grandfather. Another couple who chose their daughters' names from one parent's kin and their son's from another was Sturla Sighvatsson and Solveig Sæmundardóttir. Their only son Jón bore the first name of his mother's paternal grandfather, Jón Loftsson, who was the most powerful and well respected man of his generation.³³ Jón was also the name of his mother's maternal grandfather, and it is not found among Jón's father's kin. Yet Sturla and Solveig's eldest two daughters shared names with their father's two grandmothers, both of whom were among the most influential and powerful women of their generation. However, this choice of names was unusual since their mother's lineage was the more prestigious and distinguished, not only on account of her grandfather, but also his mother, who was the daughter of the powerful Norwegian king Magnús Barefoot. Perhaps it was Solveig's male kin who were important in naming their son, since the person he was named for was so influential, but Sturla's female kin were more important in naming their girls, since it was these women who commanded respect and power, rather than any of Solveig's female kin. It seems that to Sturla and Solveig, it was not descent or prestige that mattered, but the power wielded and respect commanded by those whose names they gave their children.

In other cases personal bonds appear most important. Guðný Böðvarsdóttir fostered her grandson Sturla Þórðarson, a younger, illegitimate son of her eldest son. In the 1240s Sturla named a daughter Guðný. The name is not found among the kin of Sturla's wife, and it seems likely that Sturla chose it to honour his grandmother. The sagas indicate some affection between grandmother and grandson, not least when Guðný singled out Sturla from among her fourteen grandsons

³³ SS, I, p. 113, ch. 34.

and ten granddaughters by leaving her extensive wealth to him at her death in 1221.³⁴ In the case of the sisters Steinunn Hrafnisdóttir and Herdís Hrafnisdóttir, affection is more difficult to demonstrate; however, it is possible that there was a sisterly fondness between the two women, not least due to periods of co-residence in childhood and as adults. The sagas indicate that sometime after Herdís's first husband Eyjólfir died, she moved to what had been her father's main homestead at Eyrr, where her sister Steinunn lived with her husband.³⁵ After her second marriage, Herdís's husband Sigmundr was often with her kinsmen at Eyrr and supporting them on expeditions, although there is reason to believe that their home was in another part of the West Fjords.³⁶ That the women each gave a first daughter the name of her sister—Herdís's only daughter is called Steinunn, and Steinunn's eldest daughter is Herdís—suggests that there was something more between them than merely their blood kinship. It is true that the names are found among other close kinswomen. The sisters' paternal grandmother is named Steinunn and their paternal aunt is Herdís. Nevertheless, few, if any, other sisters in the contemporary sagas have both named a daughter after each other, let alone a first daughter.

Choosing a name which belonged to a kinswoman on both sides of the family might be a way to recognize both kin groups. For example, Þóra Guðmundardóttir shared her name with her father's mother and with her mother's paternal grandmother. Her father was a chieftain in his own right, and her maternal great-grandmother was the same daughter of a king related to Solveig, mentioned above. Perhaps in this way her parents wished to capitalize on advantages from both sides of the family. They could hope to gain influence and protection for their daughter by displaying kinship to a powerful chieftain, as well as make reference to her royal lineage which might tempt a suitable husband. It is interesting that Þóra's elder sister was also called Þóra, suggesting that this name was meant to signify something.

Naming patterns in Commonwealth Iceland suggest that choosing a baby's name from among kin, for both males and females, was the

³⁴ SS, I, p. 303, ch. 52. Most of this wealth was taken by Sturla's uncle Snorri in 1221 without compensating Sturla, so the choice of name was not likely to imply an expectation of inheritance for this daughter.

³⁵ SS, I, pp. 360–61, ch. 88; p. 389, ch. 111; p. 447, ch. 146.

³⁶ SS, I, p. 369, ch. 96; pp. 461–65, ch. 156; II, p. 10, ch. 4; p. 29, ch. 14; pp. 50–1, ch. 26.

most prevalent practice, although among baby girls choosing an unusual name was also common. Children were hardly ever named after a parent, although they frequently shared a name with other close relations, suggesting that close familial links outside the conjugal unit were important. Grandfathers and grandmothers were the most common kin member with whom a child shared a name, followed closely by great-grandparents, uncles and aunts. Maternal and paternal relatives were both well represented, although there was a preference for paternal kin. The importance of the bilateral kinship system in Iceland provided a larger pool of first names from which a parent might select, perhaps placing a greater emphasis on choice, and thereby on prestige, power and personal relationships when a choice was made. Choosing the name of a close kinswoman might fulfil one or more of several purposes: to commemorate or honour a particular relative; in the hope of fostering a connection to or enlisting the aid of the woman whose name was used; as a result of affection felt for a kinswoman; to exploit the prestige, power or respect of the relative for whom a child was named; or to signify important family connections.

Property

Property is an area which might shed some light on grandmothers and their identity in this role. Several of the grandmothers in this study held property when they were older; what they did with it, if anything, might provide some clues as to their interest in the following generations. Yet the sources are not particularly informative on this topic. The handful of charters concerning women prior to the end of the Commonwealth period rarely discusses property belonging to the named woman. And the sagas, so rich in other material of interest to the social historian, are not primarily concerned with property or its transmission. Nevertheless, there are some indications that medieval Icelandic women both held and made use of property. Unfortunately, what we can ascertain of their control is almost certainly incomplete and uneven, not least because the only property held by women to be included in the sagas was that which furthered the narrative.³⁷

Despite these reservations, it is clear that high-ranking Icelandic women did acquire property during the later Commonwealth. Both

³⁷ See Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 38–39, for further discussion of these issues.

legal theory and practice emphasized female inheritance in the same degree as males before more distant relations, and emphasized collateral inheritance by both men and women before more distant lineal male kin.³⁸ Thus, a daughter inherited before a brother, and a sister before an uncle or a grandson. Furthermore, flexibility in inheritance law and custom allowed daughters and sisters to inherit alongside their brothers, often in the form of dowries.³⁹ Women were therefore well placed to succeed to land in Commonwealth Iceland. Among the forty-seven women in my study of Icelandic widows, at least twenty-one acquired family property.⁴⁰

Inheritance was not the only way in which a woman could gain control over land. Widows routinely became the guardian of their minor children, thereby gaining the right to control their children's paternal inheritance.⁴¹ Twenty-one women in my study had minor children when widowed. Only one certainly did not gain guardianship of her offspring; at least seventeen did. Of those who did gain guardianship, at least fourteen administered their deceased husband's property on behalf of their children.⁴² Women could also be given temporary control over property, or they could establish their own household, although these opportunities for property acquisition were far less common.⁴³

How often women were able to transfer their property to others is not clear. Although a significant number of women had control over property, most appear to have acted as administrators or custodians of the land for their heirs.⁴⁴ The legal statements suggest that women were allowed to buy, sell or transfer land as a gift.⁴⁵ Yet only three widows

³⁸ *Grágás. Islendernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, 2 parts, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1852–70; reprinted Odense, 1974), part 1, pp. 218–21 (hereafter *Grágás Ia*), part 2, p. 239 (hereafter *Grágás Ib*); *Grágás efter det Arnarnagæske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1879; reprinted Odense, 1974), pp. 64, 97 (hereafter *Grágás II*); Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Konur og vígamenn: staða kynjanna á Íslandi á 12. og 13. öld* (Reykjavík, 1995), pp. 85–98; Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization, xi (Odense, 1998), pp. 33–41; Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 45–47, 49–50, 80–81.

³⁹ *Grágás*, Ia, 221; II, 64, 85. Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 92–5.

⁴⁰ See Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 78–122.

⁴¹ Agnes Arnórsdóttir, 'Kvinner og "krigsmenn"', p. 168; Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', p. 167.

⁴² Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 167–71.

⁴³ *SS*, I, pp. 72–4, ch. 9; p. 156, ch. 28; p. 271, ch. 35; p. 323, ch. 68. For a discussion of these issues, see Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 190–92.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of women's property transactions, see Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 186–94, especially pp. 192–93.

⁴⁵ *Grágás*, Ia, 247; Ib, 76–79.

(Hallbera Snorradóttir, Þuríðr Gizurardóttir and Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir) are recorded as having alienated property during their lifetime, suggesting that opportunities were either limited, or that they applied mainly to land insufficient in size to be saga-worthy.⁴⁶ In these circumstances, it is significant that at least three (Guðný Böðvarsdóttir, Þuríðr Gizurardóttir and Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir) of the fifteen probable grandmothers attempted to use property to benefit a grandchild, especially since at least six others had little or no property to give. It is not implausible that the ratio is higher, but that the property given was too small to be recorded by saga authors. It is also noteworthy that two of the grandmothers who used land for a grandchild's benefit were among the three widows who alienated land, raising the possibility that when land was permanently transferred by women, it might have been used most often to benefit grandchildren.

Before moving on to those women who did help a grandchild materially, something must be said of those women who were not in a position to do so. Some women, like Halldóra Tumadóttir and Solveig Sæmundardóttir, were in a poor position *vis-à-vis* wealth when their grandchildren needed assistance. Both had forfeited a position of influence and were forced to relinquish their family home and main estate after their husbands were killed in battle in 1238.⁴⁷ Neither had substantial wealth, as earlier, to aid their grandchildren; if they used some or all of what remained to them to promote the interests of a grandchild, it would have been too little to interest the saga authors. Other grandmothers, such as Hallbera Einarsdóttir and Þóra Guðmundardóttir, had a son who had become a powerful chieftain in his own right before his father's death. Unlike most of the powerful widows, these women were not caretakers of the large amount of property which passed from chieftain father to his minor son or sons.⁴⁸ Hallbera and Þóra had grown children when they were widowed, and there was little or no need for them to protect their children's interests or wealth. Their sons could do that for themselves. As a result, they had far less wealth at their disposal than other widows, like Guðný Böðvarsdóttir and Þuríðr Gizurardóttir, and thus fewer means to help their grandchildren. The property transactions of these 'impoverished' grandmothers, and of other widows

⁴⁶ SS, I, p. 27, ch. 11; p. 243, ch. 18; p. 480, ch. 167.

⁴⁷ SS, I, pp. 434–36, ch. 138; p. 440, ch. 140; p. 447, ch. 145.

⁴⁸ Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 167–69.

like them, simply were not substantial enough to make an impact on the politics recorded in the sagas. If their grandchildren were in need of financial help, they would be better placed to seek assistance from a powerful uncle, rather than their grandmother. That is not to say that these women had no interaction with their grandchildren—some certainly did. Þóra Guðmundardóttir was staying with her chieftain son and his sons at his home in 1242.⁴⁹ Hallbera Einarisdóttir's husband fostered their grandson Guðmundr at their marital home when the boy was very young, and Guðmundr might have lived with Hallbera in one of her children's households sometime in the ten years between her husband's death and her own.⁵⁰ But the interactions between these women and their grandchildren were probably characterized more by affection, nurture, day-to-day contact and/or limited material aid than by power or gifts of substantial property.

Three grandmothers did, however, make property transactions which were of sufficient interest and size to be recorded. In 1253, Ingibjörg Sturludóttir married the eldest son of Gizurr Þorvaldsson, one of the most powerful men in Iceland. Presumably, she needed a dowry to reflect the importance and prestige of the alliance between her family and Gizurr's kin. Ingibjörg's maternal grandmother, Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir, gave land in Sælingsdalr, as well as movables, to augment her granddaughter's dowry, a granddaughter who shared a name with Jóreiðr's mother.⁵¹ This wealth amounted to forty hundreds, or 40% of the dowry. The sagas give no reason for this generous gift, making it impossible to say why Jóreiðr chose to give so much wealth to Ingibjörg. Is it possible that naming patterns could have had an effect on relationships? Were names sometimes chosen in Iceland, as in England, to denote potential inheritance, especially a claim of daughters, particularly the eldest, to a share of maternal family lands?⁵² It is surely important that Helga was Jóreiðr's only child. Did Helga name her eldest daughter Ingibjörg after her mother's mother, in the hope that her mother's property would eventually pass to this child? Or is it more likely that the name Helga and her husband chose for their first child created

⁴⁹ SS, I, p. 458, ch. 154; II, p. 14, ch. 7; pp. 29–30, ch. 15.

⁵⁰ SS, I, pp. 122–24, chs 3–4.

⁵¹ SS, I, p. 480, ch. 167.

⁵² Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 83–84; Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 216–17. For patrilineal inheritance and names, see Postles, n. 31.

an association or affiliation from birth, which Jóriðr felt towards this particular grandchild?⁵³ These scenarios, two of many, are no more than conjecture, and lacking further evidence, these questions cannot be answered. However the application of similar questions to other cases, where possible, might help to clarify the nature of a grandmother's identity in this role.

Another grandmother who tried to help a grandchild financially was Guðný Böðvarsdóttir. As noted above, she left her extensive movable wealth to her grandchild and foster-son Sturla Þórðarson. She did this despite having numerous grandchildren, as well as three sons and two daughters, and despite Sturla's young age (he was only seven at Guðný's death). Although Sturla's youth and an uncle who disregarded his mother's wishes prevented Sturla from gaining any of the wealth, the bequest seems to imply affection between grandmother and grandson.⁵⁴ Sturla's choice of name—Guðný—for one of his daughters supports this theory, as does the fact that he was a foster-son as well as a grandchild. There is certainly evidence of strong affectionate bonds between foster-parent and child.⁵⁵ This grandmother seems, at her death, to have chosen to emphasize her role as foster-mother, rather than that of grandmother, in her financial bequest. Of course it is entirely possible that Guðný was practicing what Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenberg call 'selective investment', that is, focusing one's time, energy and effort on one or two grandchildren to the exclusion or near exclusion of others.⁵⁶ Her choice of foster-son—and fostering in Commonwealth Iceland was a relationship of choice—may have been the beginning of such a strategy of grandparenting, which culminated in her bequest. The combination of the blood relationship of grandparent with the choice of relationship of foster-parent might have been used by Guðný to advance or favour this particular kin member through her wealth, power and prestige. However, it is also possible, even probable, that this bequest, as virtually the only glimpse given by

⁵³ Postles raises this point in connection with spiritual 'friendship', that is, attachment of a person to his or her name saint. Dave Postles, 'Identity and Identification' (see n. 21), pp. 38–39.

⁵⁴ *SS*, I, p. 303, ch. 52.

⁵⁵ See the discussion of fosterage in Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', in *Medieval Mothering* (see Rosenthal, above, n. 6), pp. 201–22 (pp. 206–09).

⁵⁶ Andrew Cherlin and Frank F. Furstenberg, 'Styles and Strategies of Grandparenting', in *Grandparenthood*, ed. by Vern L. Bengtson and Joan F. Robertson (Beverly Hills, CA, 1985), pp. 97–116 (pp. 110–13).

the sagas illuminating Guðný's role as grandmother, has obscured other facets of that role. Had the saga author been interested in other activities as a grandmother, for example Guðný's day-to-day contact with her grandchildren, her possible co-residence with a daughter shortly after the birth of a grandchild or Guðný's potential role of mentor for future generations, we might have a more complex view of Guðný as a grandmother.

In Þuríðr Gizurardóttir's case, fosterage and fondness also appear crucial. The sagas mention not only affection, but Þuríðr's love for her grandson and foster-son Tumi Sighvatsson.⁵⁷ It is likely that this love motivated Þuríðr and her second husband Sigurðr to try to further Tumi's future power and wealth by passing to him chieftaincies which came into Sigurðr's hands.⁵⁸ Since Tumi was at this point still a young child and could not yet run a chieftaincy, this does not seem the best strategy to increase the influence of Þuríðr's close kin. She and Sigurðr had already taken an active role in helping Þuríðr's elder son enhance his power; surely giving these chieftaincies to him would have furthered this goal. Giving the chieftaincies instead to a young boy for his future wellbeing appears to have been an act of deep affection.

We can be certain that property was given by some grandparents to aid some of their grandchildren. There are a few known cases of this generosity, and probably far more that involved smaller amounts of wealth that have gone unrecorded. Perhaps the passing of some wealth to a grandchild, when possible, was seen as part of a grandmother's role. Determining the motivation behind such gifts is more difficult. In at least two cases, those of Guðný Böðvarsdóttir and Þuríðr Gizurardóttir, affection appears to have been a major factor. However, it is possible that the grandchild singled out materially by these women was chosen because he was also a foster-son. In these cases, it is possible that the woman's role of foster-mother was more important to her identity than her role of grandmother, or that the combination was especially powerful. Affection might also have played a part when Jóreiðr augmented her granddaughter's dowry, although family honour and the fulfilment of significant political alliances could have been more important or even the overriding factor. Unfortunately, the sagas do

⁵⁷ SS, I, p. 239, ch. 13: *Þá buðu þau [Þuríðr and Sigurðr] til föstrs Tuma, syni Sighvats, ok unnu allmikil* ('At that time they [Þuríðr and Sigurðr] offered to foster Tumi Sighvatson, and they loved him dearly'). The translation is mine.

⁵⁸ SS, I, p. 243, ch. 18.

not supply definitive answers to the question of motivation for the gift of property, and the best we can do is use the evidence to reach the most likely conclusion.

Residence

Place of residence is another useful tool to add to our knowledge of women whose lives overlapped with those of their grandchildren; occasionally, it can add to our knowledge of affection between the first and third generation as well. Again, the contemporary sagas are less than forthcoming in many instances. Where an elderly widow lived was often of little interest when regional, national and international politics were concerned. In the handful of recorded cases, the widows' residence was noted because it impacted on the narrative in a significant way. For example, she might have been present during a raid on a family estate, or she may have acted to improve the intra-family relations of a kinsman (her household serving as a focal point). In all cases, only those widowed grandmothers connected with chieftains are mentioned, demonstrating some of the limitations of the evidence when trying to trace relations and affection between the first and third generations.

Three grandmothers were present during raids on family estates: Valgerðr Jónsdóttir, mother of Solveig Sæmundardóttir and mother-in-law of the chieftain Sturla Sighvatsson; Þóra Guðmundardóttir, mother of the chieftain Gizurr Þorvaldsson; and Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir, mother of Helga Þórðardóttir and mother-in-law of the chieftain Sturla Þórðarson. Valgerðr was staying at Sauðafell in 1229, when her daughter Solveig had recently given birth to her second child; her presence is noted during a raid on the farm by Sturla's enemies.⁵⁹ Clearly, she lived to see at least some of her grandchildren, and she must have known the elder one, if not the others. Although this saga episode reveals the concern Valgerðr felt for her daughter and records her attempts to uphold her family's honour, there is no indication of any grandmotherly concern for her two granddaughters, and it is not possible to determine how she felt about them. In fact, the care for the safety of these children during the raid was left to others; the servant Arngerðr Torfadóttir, foster-mother to one daughter, took care of her safety, and it is unknown

⁵⁹ SS, I, pp. 325–28, ch. 71.

who took charge of the other.⁶⁰ It appears that Valgerðr saw her family identity during this crisis less as a grandmother, than as the mistress of the household in her daughter's stead. Solveig was physically and emotionally too fragile from childbirth to taunt her attackers or protect her jewels from being plundered; her mother took over these roles for her.⁶¹ Valgerðr did not concern herself with her grandchildren. That is not to say that they were unimportant to her, merely that during this emergency her focus was on her role as mother of the mistress of a chieftain's household, rather than as grandmother to his children. Because the sagas only give us this and one other snapshot of Valgerðr, it is impossible to determine whether this aspect of her identity—that is, mother to Solveig—was the major one, although it does seem to have been important to her.⁶² It is also difficult to determine how Valgerðr's identity as grandmother affected her.

Þóra Guðmundardóttir was another grandmother staying with a child, this time a son, the powerful chieftain Gizurr Þorvaldsson. When his estate at Tunga was threatened with attack one night, Þóra remained while the family possessions were taken into the church for safekeeping. Hallr, her nine-year-old grandson by Gizurr, went with his father to the bishopric at Skálholt, where Þóra and Gizurr's followers who had remained behind were to meet them the following morning.⁶³ At least one other younger grandson was then alive, but his whereabouts during this event are unknown. It is unclear why Þóra remained behind. Perhaps she was to supervise the removal of the household goods. Or perhaps, as an elderly woman, it was easier and safer for her to travel in daylight. Since the sagas provide no evidence, this must remain conjecture. At any rate, Þóra's role as Hallr's grandmother was not the facet of her familial identity called upon that night or emphasized by the saga author.

Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir also resided with a child, but in this case her daughter Helga was staying at Jóreiðr's farm at Sælingsdalstunga when enemies attacked.⁶⁴ Jóreiðr's daughter had given birth fourteen weeks earlier to a son, and Helga had at least one other child, four-year-old

⁶⁰ *SS*, I, p. 326, ch. 71.

⁶¹ *SS*, I, pp. 325–28, ch. 71.

⁶² The other incident is Solveig's betrothal, when Valgerðr was with her daughter and apparently had a hand in its making: *SS*, I, p. 299, ch. 50.

⁶³ *SS*, I, p. 458, ch. 154; II, p. 14, ch. 7.

⁶⁴ *SS*, II, p. 288, ch. 25.

Ingibjörg. This daughter was not mentioned during the incident, so it is unclear whether Ingibjörg was at Sælingsdalstunga or not. Jóreiðr is not recorded as taking any action during the raid, although she is accorded the title of *húsfreyja*, which was generally reserved for the mistress of the household when she acted authoritatively or represented a powerful man.⁶⁵ In this case the latter applies, with Jóreiðr representing her chieftain son-in-law Sturla Þórðarson. Thus, the saga author here emphasized Jóreiðr's identity as the mother-in-law of a powerful political player and the grandmother of his son and heir by mentioning her, her daughter's and her grandson's presence during the raid. Perhaps it is for this reason that no mention was made of Ingibjörg; in this instance, her presence did not affect Jóreiðr's roles as mother-in-law of a chieftain and grandmother of his heir. Ingibjörg might have been of too little significance in this case to merit a mention by the saga author, but had she been at Sælingsdalstunga during the raid her presence would probably have been of great significance to her grandmother Jóreiðr. This was, after all, the little girl to whom, nine years later, Jóreiðr would give property for a dowry.

The co-residence of these women and at least some of their grandchildren strongly suggests that the women interacted with these grandchildren on a regular, if not daily, basis. How intense, intimate or warm that interaction was often cannot be determined, since it has remained unrecorded. It is possible that the simple fact of co-residence was sufficient to establish affection between the generations in a few instances. That Valgerðr and Jóreiðr shared a household with a daughter after that daughter gave birth demonstrates the importance that Valgerðr and Jóreiðr accorded their role as mother, with the corresponding facet of their identity coming into play. Yet with the physiological and hormonal changes experienced by a mother after giving birth, as well as the extra daily tasks required of a mother by a newborn, a grandmother residing with a newly delivered daughter could offer practical, as well as emotional, support. This might often include care for the baby, perhaps enabling the bonding process between grandmother and grandchild to begin, a bond that, in some cases, probably lasted beyond those first few weeks and months. In these cases, a woman's view of her role as grandmother might take on a greater importance

⁶⁵ For a full discussion of the term *húsfreyja* and its use in the contemporary sagas, see Ricketts, 'Property, Power and Identity', pp. 230–32.

in her life. Although the sagas provide little evidence of such bonds developing, this affection or an identity as grandmother would not necessarily be the type of information of interest to the saga author. It is thus difficult to demonstrate affection when the sources are often silent on this issue. Yet there is reason to believe from the glimpses the sagas do provide that such affection and familial identification was not rare; the structural circumstance to allow and foster its development were certainly present.

Conclusion

It is time to return to the question asked at the outset of this article: 'Was Þuríðr Gizurardóttir a typical medieval Icelandic grandmother?'. This question is perhaps not possible to answer, at least as it has been formulated, since the limited evidence available seems to suggest that there was no such thing as a 'typical grandmother' in Commonwealth Iceland. As my earlier comparative work showed that it is nearly impossible to generalize widows, so the evidence here suggests that it is likewise difficult to generalize grandmothers. Much was dependent on the circumstances of individual women and the complexity of their families.

Although choosing a child's name was not generally a facet of a grandmother's identity, the naming patterns that emerge between first and third generation might reflect a grandmother's place or role within her family. Choosing a name which a daughter shared with a kinswoman was common; thirty-one of sixty-nine women in the article did so. Choosing a mother's name occurred most frequently; twelve of thirty-one women thus shared a name with a grandmother. Choosing a sister's or grandmother's name also features prominently. Þuríðr named both her daughters after close female relations, that is, her sister and her mother, and in this respect one might say that Þuríðr was typical. However, there were many permutations of kin which could be applied—choosing the name of one's mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, sister or aunt, or choosing from maternal or paternal kin—and each choice might be considered typical.

About one-fifth of the grandmothers in the article, including Þuríðr, certainly used their wealth for the benefit of a grandchild, and it is possible that others with more limited means also tried to do so. However, the form that a grandmother's help for a grandchild took

might have varied according to circumstances. What sets Þuríðr apart in this respect from many of the other grandmothers is that she had the wealth to provide aid substantial enough to warrant recording by a saga author. Other grandmothers might also have provided materially for a grandchild, albeit to a much lesser degree. Or their help could have been practical, perhaps the kind that would have emerged from daily contact or as a result of baby care or child rearing duties when their grandchild's mother was otherwise engaged. While the desire to aid a grandchild might have been typical, the manner in which one might do so seems to have been diverse.

In terms of affection, the contemporary sagas are clear in indicating the bond between Þuríðr and her favourite daughter's eldest son, and it is possible, even likely, that she felt affection for her son's daughters who lived with her. The sagas suggest that other grandmothers felt affection for grandchildren, such as Guðný Böðvarsdóttir for her grandson Sturla, and Jóriðr for her granddaughter Ingibjörg. Furthermore, it should not surprise us if some or many grandmothers in Commonwealth Iceland practiced 'selective investment', focusing on only one or two of their grandchildren. Such relationships would not necessarily be recorded by a saga author, especially if they were between a grandmother and a granddaughter or a grandson with little influence. So while Þuríðr's affection for some of her grandchildren might have been typical, the individual circumstances of the grandmothers, in respect of wealth, residence or the grandchild to whom they were relating, would have influenced the nature of the affective bond which developed. Þuríðr's bond was with a daughter's son and perhaps some of her son's daughters, Guðný's with a son's son and Jóriðr with a daughter's daughter. Each was characteristic of a bond between a grandmother and a grandchild, yet each was in its own way different.

Þuríðr Gizurardóttir resided with some of her grandchildren, which was by no means unusual. That it was her household that served as a focal point for the third generation, however, appears to have been rare. Of the other women who are recorded as having lived with a child, two—Valgerðr Jónsdóttir and Þóra Guðmundardóttir—certainly resided in that child's household, one with a daughter, the other with a son, and thus interacted with grandchildren there. A third—Hallbera Einarsdóttir—might also have lived with a child, but again in that child's household, not her own. Guðný Böðvarsdóttir's grandson almost certainly lived with her on her estate when he was fostered, as was the norm in similar cases of fostering. Another grandmother—Jóriðr

Hallsdóttir—resided with her daughter on her own farm, but in this instance her daughter Helga and her grandchildren did not live there permanently. In fact, it seems likely that Helga was there mainly as a result of recently giving birth. It is possible that she and her children were frequent visitors to Jóreiðr's farm, but other references in the sagas place Helga, with her children, in her marital household, which was the norm for married women of the chieftain class.⁶⁶ It nevertheless appears that this temporary residence lasted for several weeks or months and perhaps was repeated with each child Helga bore. As in other areas, there seems to have been no typical arrangement in terms of residence of grandmothers and grandchildren; one of several potential alternatives might have applied depending on circumstances.

The evidence taken as a whole thus appears to demonstrate that in terms of developing affective bonds, taking an interest in grandchildren, their upbringing and their future, or choosing a place of residence there was a broad spectrum of potential options from which a grandmother might choose and which would govern her identity in this role. Her current level of wealth and prestige, the complexity of her family relationships including the sex, ages, marital status and power of her children, and social structures such as fosterage and the bilateral kinship system in Commonwealth Iceland, would all have played a part in the choices a grandmother made at any particular point in time. Wealthy, prestigious women like Guðný Böðvarsdóttir and Þuríðr Gizurardóttir who had been widowed young were in a position to offer to foster a grandchild, making use of the bilateral tendencies in the kinship system to choose either a son's child or a daughter's. Others, like Hallbera Einarsdóttir and Þóra Guðmundardóttir, widowed late and not independently wealthy, had to rely on the kindness and honour of their grown sons for support and possibly for a place to live. Still others, like Halldóra Tumadóttir and Solveig Sæmundardóttir, whose husbands were killed by their enemies, leaving them virtually bereft of grown kinsmen powerful enough to protect them, could only stand by and watch their grandchildren struggle themselves for power and survival. All of these grandmothers acted within the parameters that delineated grandmotherly behaviour in Commonwealth Iceland, yet each one created an identity as a grandmother that differed in many respects from other Icelandic grandmothers and that was truly her own.

⁶⁶ SS, I, p. 482, ch. 170; II, pp. 227–30, ch. 1.

APPENDIX : POTENTIAL GRANDMOTHERS

KEY

Names in **bold** relate to information in the following column.
Names in *italic* are widows who were also daughters.
That which is underlined is provided for information only; it has not been used in the statistics due to lack of sufficient information regarding relatives.

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
Björg	no	<u>unique in sagas</u>	Rannveig, Hergerðr	<u>Rannveig</u> rare Icelandic name/ <u>Hergerðr</u> unique in sagas		
Hallbera Snorradóttir	paternal only	paternal grandmother	none		Grímur	
Yngvildr Þórðardóttir	no		Helga, Hallfríðr		none	
Álof Þorgeirsdóttir	no		Guðleif , Helga, Valgerðr, <i>Þurðr</i> , Sigríðr	<u>Guðleif</u> rare Icelandic name	Sveinn	
Hallbera Einarsdóttir	yes	paternal aunt	<i>Þóra</i> , <i>Ingibjörg</i> , Þórný , Gríma , Oddný	Þórný—maternal great aunt, uncommon Icelandic name/ Gríma rare Icelandic name	Einarr , Þorvarðr, Þórðr; Ingimundr , Ari	Einarr—maternal chieftain grandfather/ Ingimundr—maternal chieftain uncle/Ari—maternal uncle and chieftain great-grandfather

Table (cont.)

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
Kolfinna Hallsdóttir	paternal only, but no known close female relations		Hallbera , Valgerðr, Álof , Álfríðs , <i>Ingvildr</i> , Ingibjörg, Guðrún	Hallbera—paternal grandmother/ Álof—paternal great-grandmother/ Álfríðs rare Icelandic name/ Guðrún—paternal great-grandmother	Oddi , Einarr	Oddi—paternal grandfather, uncommon Icelandic name/ Einarr—paternal chieftain great-uncle
<i>Ingibjörg Þorgeirsdóttir</i>	maternal only		Steinunn, Þórdís	2 paternal great-grandmothers and paternal aunt	Einarr	maternal uncle and maternal chieftain great-grandfather
<i>Ingvildr Þorgeirsdóttir</i>	yes		Sigríðr, Jóra	Jóra unique in sagas	none	
Úlfheiðr Gunnarsdóttir	maternal only	unique in sagas, probably female variant of uncommon male name Úlfheiðinn, her maternal grandfather's name	Guðrún	paternal great-aunt	Klemet , Guðmundr, Gunnarr	Klemet rare Icelandic name/ Gunnarr—maternal grandfather
<i>Þóra Þorgeirsdóttir</i>	maternal only		unknown		unknown	

Table (cont.)

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
<i>Þuríður Sturludóttir</i>	paternal only		none		Svertíngur, Jón, Dufgus	Svertíngur and Dufgus rare Icelandic names
Guðný Bóðvarsdóttir	yes		Helga, Vigdís	Helga—maternal grandmother/ Vigdís—paternal grandmother	Þórðr, Sighvaur, Snorri	Þórðr—paternal chieftain grandfather, maternal chieftain uncle and 2 chieftain great-grandfathers/ Snorri—paternal uncle
Þuríður Gizuraradóttir	yes	paternal grandmother	Halldóra, Álfheiðr	Halldóra—maternal aunt/ Álfheiðr—maternal grandmother; uncommon Icelandic name	Kolbeinn, Arnórr	Kolbeinn—paternal chieftain grandfather/ Arnórr—paternal uncle and great-grandfather
Guðný Þorvarðsdóttir	paternal only		unknown		unknown	
Ingibjörg Guðmundardóttir	yes		none		Einarr, Kleppjárn	paternal chieftain grandfather, rare Icelandic name

Table (cont.)

<i>Woman</i>	<i>Relations known?</i>	<i>Name shared with</i>	<i>Daughters</i>	<i>Name shared with</i>	<i>Sons</i>	<i>Name shared with</i>
Kolfinna Gizurardóttir	yes		Helga		none	
Amþrúðr Fornadóttir	maternal only	unique in sagas	none		Þorsteinn, Snorri , Brandr, Klængr	father
Guðrún Bjarnadóttir	yes	maternal grandmother and paternal great-grandmother	Ósk, Halla	Ósk unique in sagas/ Halla—maternal grandmother	Böðvarr	paternal chiefain great-grandfather
Þóra Guðmundardóttir	yes	paternal grandmother and maternal great-grandmother	Halldóra, Kolfinna	Halldóra—paternal aunt and maternal great-grandmother/ Kolfinna—paternal aunt	Gizurr	paternal chiefain grandfather
Vilborg Gizurardóttir	yes	rare Icelandic name	none		Teitr	paternal grandfather

Table (cont.)

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
<i>Halldóra Tumadóttir</i>	yes	maternal aunt	Steinvör	uncommon Icelandic name	Tumi, Sturla, Kolbeinn, Þórðr kakali, Þórðr Markús, Þórðr krókr, Tumi	Tumi—maternal chieftain grandfather, name rare within and outside kin group/Sturla—paternal chieftain grandfather, uncommon name rare outside kin group/ Kolbeinn—maternal chieftain uncle and chieftain great-grandfather/Þórðr kakali and krókr—paternal chieftain uncle and chieftain great-grandfather/ Tumi, as above and dead elder brother

Table (cont.)

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
<i>Ósk Þorvarðsdóttir</i>	yes	unique in sagas	Jórunn	uncommon Icelandic name	Guttormr	paternal grandfather, uncommon Icelandic name
Hallveig Ormsdóttir	yes	rare Icelandic name	none		Klængr, Ormr	Klængr—paternal uncle and paternal bishop great-grandfather, uncommon Icelandic name/ Ormr—maternal chieftain grandfather
Ásdís Sigmundardóttir	yes	unique in sagas	Sigríðr, Herdís, Arnbjörg	Herdís—paternal great-grandmother/ Arnbjörg—maternal grandmother	Kolbeinn ungi	paternal chieftain uncle and paternal chieftain great-grandfather
Steinunn Hrafnisdóttir	yes	paternal grandmother	Herdís, Halla	Herdís—maternal aunt and maternal great-aunt/Halla—maternal great-aunt	Hrafn, Guðlaugr, Ólafir, Oddr	Hrafn—maternal chieftain grandfather/ Guðlaugr—paternal great-grandfather, uncommon Icelandic name/ Oddr—paternal great-grandfather and dead father

Table (cont.)

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
Solveig Sæmundardóttir	yes	paternal aunt, rare within and outside kin group	Guðný, Þuríðr, Ingunn	Guðný—paternal great-grandmother/ Þuríðr—paternal great-grandmother and paternal great-aunt	Jón	maternal chieftain great-grandfather
Herdís Hrafnisdóttir	yes	paternal aunt	Steinunn	maternal aunt and maternal great-grandmother	Eyjólfur, Sveinbjörn	Eyjólfur—dead father, paternal uncle and great-uncle/ Sveinbjörn—maternal uncle and chieftain great-grandfather, uncommon Icelandic name
Álfheiður Njalsdóttir	maternal only	uncommon Icelandic name	Þóra	paternal grandmother	Sæmundr, Guðmundr, Ormr	Sæmundr uncommon name rare outside kin group/ Guðmundr—paternal chieftain great-grandfather/ Ormr—dead father

Table (cont.)

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
Jórunn Kálfsdóttir	maternal only	uncommon Icelandic name	none		Kálfr , Þorgeirr	maternal grandfather, uncommon Icelandic name
Þuríðr Ormsdóttir	paternal only		none		Sighvatr	paternal chieflain grandfather
Steinunn Brandsdóttir	paternal only		none		Grímr	paternal grandfather
Þórhildr Gíslsdóttir	no	<u>rare Icelandic name</u>	Guðrún, Vígdís		none	
Þórdís Snorradóttir	paternal only	paternal aunt and paternal great-aunt	Kolfinna, daughter, daughter		Einarrr	
Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir	yes	uncommon Icelandic name	Helga		none	
Randalín Filippusdóttir	yes	unique in sagas	Ríkiza	unique in sagas, probable variant of continental name which were common among Randalín's kin	Guðmundr	
Vílborg sister of Órækja	no	<u>rare Icelandic name</u>	unknown		unknown	
Óddný Halldórsdóttir	no		unknown		unknown	

Table (cont.)

Woman	Relations known?	Name shared with	Daughters	Name shared with	Sons	Name shared with
<i>Ingunn Sturludóttir</i>	yes		none		Sturla	maternal chieftain grandfather, uncommon name rare outside kin group
Arnriður Bjarnadóttir	no	<u>unique in sagas</u>	unknown		unknown	
Ingibjörg Sturludóttir	yes	maternal great-grandmother	unknown		unknown	
Ingibjörg	no		unknown		unknown	
Eirný Halldórsdóttir	no	rare Icelandic name	unknown		unknown	

AGE MATTERS IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

Jordi Sánchez-Martí

For the scholarly recovery and understanding of extinct societies we are dependent primarily on extant cultural artefacts in the form of either written records or archaeological remains. In general, expressions of a society's cultural tenets are rarely to be found explicitly mentioned in early historical records, but are more likely to surface indirectly in literary texts. In the case of Anglo-Saxon England, while the preservation and study of both textual objects and material remains has contributed to articulate scholarly accounts of this historical period,¹ our knowledge about this age continues to be imperfect, mainly with regards to the social attitudes and values of the Anglo-Saxons. Taking into account that Old English literature, the poetry in particular, has been considered to be 'the great collective medium through which the Anglo-Saxons conceived of their changing social world',² this article explores how Old English literary texts represent the cultural qualities of and expectations about the different stages in the development of Anglo-Saxon males. By surveying the Old English literary corpus I hope to recapture some of the ways in which the Anglo-Saxons constructed and thought about the biological process of growing from boyhood to old age. In so doing I will approach the literary sources not as a reflection of an historically accurate reality, but as an expression of the Anglo-Saxon social outlook on matters of age.³

¹ Still useful is the overview presented by Bruce Mitchell, *An Invitation to Old English & Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 73–243. More recently, see *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, ed. by Catherine E. Karkov (New York, 1999). For a summary of archaeological contributions to the study of age, see Heinrich Härke, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure', in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: an Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. by John Hines (Woodbridge, 1997; repr. 2003), pp. 125–70 (pp. 125–30). See also Shannon Lewis-Simpson, this volume.

² John D. Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts* (Turnhout, 2007), p. 1.

³ As Härke states, 'the divergences between Anglo-Saxon literary perceptions, legal codes, and ritual expression of age grades are conspicuous' ('Anglo-Saxon Social Structure', p. 129). Since the Old English corpus may be thought to be limited, reference will be made to the cognate Old Norse literature for comparative purposes. Scholars have traditionally recognized that the Old English and Norse literary traditions share

In his ‘Homily on the Parable of the Vineyard’ (c. 992) Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham, makes an insightful comment that gives us a general view of how contemporary Anglo-Saxons may have perceived and structured the process of growing from childhood to old age:

Witodlice ures andgites merigen. is ure cildhád. ure cnihtád swylce underntíd on þam astihð ure geogoð. swa swa seo sunne deð ymbe þære ðriddan tide; Ure fulfremeda wæstm. swa swa middæg for ðan ðe on midne dæg bið seo sunne on ðam ufemestum rýne stígende. swa swa se fulfremeda wæstm bið on fulre strencoðe þéonde; Seo nontíd bið ure yld. for ðan ðe on nontide asihð seo sunne. and ðæs caldigendan mannes mægen bið wanigende. Seo endlyfte tid bið seo forwerode caldynss þam deaðe genealæcende. swa swa seo sunne setlunge genealæhð. on þæs dæges geendunge.⁴

Even though Ælfric is translating from Pope Gregory the Great’s *Homiliae in Evangelia*,⁵ the Old English version departs significantly from the Latin original and presents a genuinely Anglo-Saxon view of the ages

an inheritance from a common Germanic background, and more recently it has been suggested that Old Norse literature influenced Old English literature during Viking-Age England, thus making the introduction of analogues relevant. Although the study of literary relations between Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Scandinavia has some limitations and lacks positive certainty (see Roberta Frank, ‘Anglo-Scandinavian Poetic Relations’, *ANQ*, 3 (1990), 74–79 (p. 75)), I follow Robert E. Bjork’s advice, ‘to dwell in the possibility’ (‘Scandinavian Relations’, in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2001), p. 389). For a survey of recent scholarship, see Richard Dance, ‘North Sea Currents: Old English–Old Norse Relations, Literary and Linguistic’, *Literature Compass*, 1 (2004), 1–5.

⁴ *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: the Second Series, Text*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series, 5 (London, 1979), p. 44: ‘Certainly, the morning of our understanding is our childhood, our adolescence is like the third hour, on which our youth rises, just as the sun does about that third hour; our completed growth is just as midday, for at midday the sun is ascending to its uppermost orbit, just as the completed growth is increasing to its full strength. The ninth hour is our old age, for on the ninth hour the sun declines, and the might of the ageing man is waning. The eleventh hour is very old age, with death approaching, just as the sun approaches setting at the end of the day’. Unless otherwise stated, translations in this article are my own. For biographical information on Ælfric, see Malcolm Godden, ‘Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 950–c. 1010)’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford, 2004), I, 387–8.

⁵ *Patrologia Latina*, ed. by J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844–64), LXXVI, 1155. See Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series, 18 (Oxford, 2000), p. 383.

of man.⁶ Using the canonical hours as an analogous reference,⁷ Ælfric compares the cycle of life with the progress of the solar day and agrees with Gregory in distinguishing the following ages of man: *cildhād* ('childhood', Latin *pueritia*), *cnihthād* ('adolescence', L. *adolescentia*), *geogoð* ('youth', L. *juventus*), *ylð* ('old age', L. *senectus*), and *forwerode ealdnyss* ('very old age', L. *aetas... decrepita vel veterana*). However, while Gregory presents *juventus* separately as the age analogous to sext or midday in which *plenitudo roboris solidatur* (loc. cit.: 'the plenitude of vigour is established'), Ælfric prefers to present *geogoð* as the culmination of adolescence in terce, but not as the age of plenitude. He reserves instead the time of noon for another age group, namely *fulfremeda wæstm* ('completed growth'), the interval between youth and old age in which individuals culminate their physical development.

Apart from providing us with a working road map to the ages of man in late Anglo-Saxon times, this Ælfrician passage also contains a fundamental clue to understanding how the phases of biological development were measured in pre-Conquest England: while old age is determined by physical decline and the lack of *mægen* ('bodily strength'), the growth in the earlier stages is not tied to physical but to intellectual development because of the initial absence of *andgit* ('understanding, intellect'). Here Ælfric is echoing and elaborating on biblical lore expressed in statements such as this: 'exultatio iuvenum fortitudo eorum et dignitas senum canities' (Prov. 20:29).⁸ The attribution of *fortitudo* ('strength') to young people seems quite natural, but the metaphorical allusion to *canities* ('grey hair') was in need of further elucidation, which Bede, the historian and exegete, provides in his *Super Parabolas Salomonis Allegorica Expositio*: 'Canitiem sapientiam dicit [...] et seniores maiore prudentia

⁶ For the way Ælfric accessed and presented his sources, see Joyce Hill, 'Translating the Tradition: Manuscripts, Models and Methodologies in the Composition of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*', in *Textual and Material Culture in Anglo-Saxon England: Thomas Northcote Toller and the Toller Memorial Lectures*, ed. by Donald Scragg (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 241–59.

⁷ For a discussion of the canonical hours in Anglo-Saxon times, see Frederick Tupper, Jr., 'Anglo-Saxon Dæg-Mæl', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 10 (1895), 111–241.

⁸ *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. by Robert Weber et al., 4th edn (Stuttgart, 1994), p. 975: 'the joy of young men is their strength; and the dignity of old men their grey hairs'. Translation from the Douay's Version (Baltimore, 1914), p. 673.

praediti, de his quae agenda sunt, salubriter consulunt' (2.20).⁹ Thus the basic dichotomy between the bodily strength associated with youth and the *sapientia* ('wisdom') of age becomes apparent. The relationship between these two qualities is inversely proportional: the older someone is, the less his strength and the greater his wisdom, and vice versa, as encapsulated in Jerome's words: 'omnes paene uirtutes corporis mutantur in senibus et increscente sola sapientia decrescunt ceterae'.¹⁰ The implication of the biblical proverb cited above was that youngsters, without neglecting their physical condition so important in the Anglo-Saxon warrior society, had to store knowledge and experience to satisfy expectations of wisdom in their advanced age.

One cannot presume that this biblical state of affairs could have any significant impact on social mores were it only to be formulated in learned contexts, despite it being accessible in the vernacular as in the case of Ælfric's homily. Poetry remains the best expression available to us of Anglo-Saxon cultural values, since one of the objectives of Old English poetry was, as Peter Clemoes reminds us, to pass down 'society's collective wisdom about itself'.¹¹ The sapiential text known as *Maxims I*, preserved in the tenth-century Exeter Book, contains a popular correspondence to the message of the biblical proverb and is a confirmation that its import had been absorbed by the Anglo-Saxons and adapted to fit their own mindset:

Lef mon læces behofað. Læran sceal mon geongne monnan,
trymman ond tyhtan þæt he teala cunne, oþþæt hine mon atemedne hæbbe,
syllle him wist ond wædo, oþþæt hine mon on gewitte alæde (lines 45–47).¹²

⁹ Patrologia Latina, XCI, 999: 'it says that grey hair means wisdom [...] and elderly men endowed with greater prudence reflect wholesomely about the things that should be done'. See further in Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (London, 1953; repr. 1979), pp. 98–100. For biographical information about Bede, see J. Campbell, 'Bede (673/4–735)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, IV, 758–65.

¹⁰ *Epistulae I–LXX*, ed. by Isidorus Hilberg, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna, 1910), p. 416: 'almost all the powers of the body are changed in aged men, and while wisdom alone increases, all the rest fade away'. Cf. Gregory, *Moralium Libri, sive Expositio in Librum B. Job*, Patrologia Latina, LXXV, 674: *mentis virtute crescente, oportet procul dubio ut carnis fortitudo torpescat* ('when the power of the mind grows, it must certainly happen that the strength of the body becomes listless').

¹¹ *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 68.

¹² When no other specific edition is cited, all quotations from Old English poetry are from *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. by George P. Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie (New York, 1931–53), 6 vols: 'A sick man needs a doctor. A young man is to

While the biblical verses simply make factual observations about the value of youth and age, the Old English poem wants to translate the biblical message into action to guarantee that youths achieved the necessary *sapientia*. As Carolyn Larrington argues, in these lines from *Maxims I* ‘there is an implied comparison between the young man and a young animal who must be tamed’.¹³ That is to say, society needs to domesticate and civilize the younger ones so that in their adult lives they will be able to perform the social function expected from them. Thus, the instruction of young people is presented in the poem as the responsibility of the community, whose lifestyle’s continuity ultimately depends on the successful transmission of wisdom between the generations.

The poetical testimonies do not suggest that this type of instruction could be best achieved by the formal schooling of youngsters. In fact, the abilities that had to be transmitted were not those covered in the curriculum of educational institutions, because they consisted of the traditional knowledge specific to their own community.¹⁴ Therefore, it seems quite appropriate that the first figure in charge of the training and education of a boy during his *cildhád* (‘childhood’) should be the father, as in the Exeter Book *Precepts*:

Ðus frod fæder freobearn lærde,
modsnottor mon, maga cystum cald,
wordum wisfæstum, þæt he wel þunge (lines 1–3).¹⁵

The father’s guidance in *Precepts* is organized systematically and adopts the framing device of the numbering of each occasion upon which advice is sought, thus suggesting, as Elaine Hansen argues, that ‘the transmission of wisdom from the old wise one to the beloved young

be taught, to be encouraged and prompted to know things well, until you have made him manageable’. Trans. by T.A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 67. For a detailed codicological analysis of the tenth-century Exeter Book, see Patrick W. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: a Tenth-Century Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1993).

¹³ *A Store of Common Sense: Gnomie Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford, 1993), p. 124.

¹⁴ Cf. n. 23. For the nature of education and the school curriculum in pre-Conquest England, see Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools from Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (New Haven, 2006), pp. 17–46. See also Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 145–53.

¹⁵ ‘This is how the father—a man of experience with an intelligent mind, a man who had grown old in good qualities—this is how he taught his noble son, giving him sensible advice, so that he would get on well’. Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 49.

one takes time and is thought of as an ongoing experience rather than a single initiatory event'.¹⁶ Although in *Precepts* there are no precise indications about the duration of the period of parental instruction, it seems to have extended while the son was under the father's tutelage, which in the case of *Beowulf* ended at the age of seven.¹⁷ The symbolic father of *Precepts* wants his son to be prepared for the difficulties and dangers that await him when he leaves the family home, and also teaches the boy to conduct himself according to the accepted social norms. In one of the lessons the father advises his son against being hasty of speech: *Wærwyrde sceal wisfæst hæle/breostum hycgan, nales breahthme hlud* (lines 57–58).¹⁸ This piece of advice reflects not simply the father's prudent and reserved character, but instead what appears to be a rule of behaviour perceived as virtuous in Anglo-Saxon times, as confirmed by the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, often described as elegiac. In an interior monologue the poem's solitary speaker, who has already left the parental home, mentions his acquaintance with and acceptance of that parental instruction:

Ic to soþe wat
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw
 þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde,
 healde his hordcofan (lines 11^b–14^a).¹⁹

Both *Precepts* and *The Wanderer* thus suggest that the Anglo-Saxons perceived reserved speech as *indryhten þeaw* ('a noble custom'), and the

¹⁶ 'Precepts: An Old English Instruction', *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 1–16 (p. 7). Nicholas Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, Anglistica, 23 (Copenhagen, 1985), p. 145, has argued that 'the order of the ten entries in the catalogue [*Precepts*] corresponds roughly to the order of human life; both follow the common, three-fold division of youth, maturity and old age'. This interpretation has to be taken with caution and Howe himself is aware of its tentative nature (see pp. 150–51), since this instruction is given to the benefit of a man only in his infantile years, not throughout his entire life. For a discussion of childhood in Anglo-Saxon England from a historical point of view, see Mathew S. Kuefler, "'A Wryed Existence": Attitudes toward Children in Anglo-Saxon England', *Journal of Social History*, 24 (1991), 823–34.

¹⁷ Cf. n. 21 below.

¹⁸ 'A sensible man must be careful with his words, and think things over in his heart, not be loud and noisy'. Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 51.

¹⁹ *The Wanderer*, ed. by T.P. Dunning and A.J. Bliss (New York, 1969): 'I know as a fact that it is in a grown man a noble custom to bind firmly his breast, to preserve the treasury of his thoughts'. For an understanding of these lines as interior monologue, see Gerald Richman, 'Speaker and Speech Boundaries in *The Wanderer*', *Journal of English and German Philology*, 81 (1982), 469–79 (p. 473). For the expression of the same rule in other Old English poems, see *Andreas*, 58, 1671; *Juliana*, 234; *Maxims I*, 121–23.

knowledge of this custom had to be transferred and understood during a man's childhood and youth, so that when this child became an older man (*eorl*) his conduct could not be found to be at fault. The Wanderer himself, who first expresses his familiarity with this precept, next declares how he has applied it: *swa ic modsefan minne sceolde/[...] feterum sælan* (lines 19, 21^b).²⁰

It is unlikely that the father's teachings should be enough to prepare the boy completely, and in fact the symbolic father in *Precepts* is himself aware of the convenience of bringing up the boy in fosterage outside the family, a well-established social practice.²¹ For that stage the father gives the following advice:

ac þu þe anne genim
to gesprecan symle spella ond lara
rædhycgende. Sy ymb rice swa hit mæge (lines 24^b–26).²²

The father places the most value on the knowledge found in *spella ond lara* ('stories and precepts'), since these moral stories and maxims collect the popular wisdom a community produced and inherited from previous generations.²³ It is therefore fitting that youngsters should store this common knowledge that will prove instrumental in securing their *sapientia* when they become old. Since wisdom is popular and democratic, the father instructs his putative son to lend authority to other educational

²⁰ 'So I have had to bind my thoughts with fetters'.

²¹ The education of children in the home of others started as early as the age of seven, as in the case of Beowulf, whose father entrusted him to King Hrethel: 'Ic wæs syfanwintre, þa mec sinca baldor/freawine folca æt minum fæder genam' (lines 2428–29; *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by Fr. Klaeber, 3rd edn with supplements (Boston, 1950)): 'I was seven years of age when the lord and friend of the people, the lord of treasures, received me from my father'. See Härke, 'Anglo-Saxon Social Structure', p. 126; Kuefler, 'Attitudes toward Children', pp. 830–31; Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 122–32. For the practice of fosterage in the Icelandic sagas, see Anna Hansen in this volume.

²² 'But always choose as an adviser for yourself someone who is resourceful in precepts and examples, whatever his status happens to be'. Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 49.

²³ Since this article examines the poetical corpus regardless of genre, the kind of wisdom observed is a synthesis of the pagan Germanic tradition and the Christian one. R.E. Kaske, 'Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*', in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, 1963), pp. 269–310, considers that the *sapientia* present in *Beowulf* also combines both traditions. He gives the following definition of the term that is useful for our own purposes: 'a general, eclectic concept including such diverse qualities as practical cleverness, skill in words and works, knowledge of the past, ability to predict accurately, prudence, understanding, and the ability to choose and direct one's conduct rightly' (p. 272).

figures, not because they are ‘of high rank’ (*rice*), but because they are *ræðhycgende* (‘wise’, literally ‘understanding of advice’).

In the post-parental stage the priority for the youngsters lies not so much in the passive reception of explicit teachings from a wise person, but instead in their active learning from individuals who have made relevant achievements as suggested by Saturn, himself an old and wise figure, in the dialogue poem *Solomon and Saturn*:

Ac forhwan nele monn him on giogoðe georne gewyrcan
deores dryhtscipes and dædfruman,
wadan on wisdom, winnan æfter snytro? (lines 388–90)²⁴

Now during the *giogoðe* (‘youth’, loosely used here to describe the age groups previous to adulthood), the kind of practical knowledge obtained from persons of action becomes particularly important. The figure of reference is no longer the sage but the *dædfruma*, literally ‘doer of deeds’, and the epithet used is no longer ‘wise’ but *deor* (‘brave’). By sharing life experiences with this kind of people the younger ones obtain wisdom but mostly of a practical nature, namely, *snytro* (‘practical cleverness, sagacity’). The training in this period concerns mainly their vigorous and young *fortitudo*, which needs regular practice to prepare for the violent realities of Anglo-Saxon society. These practical men can also be a source of useful advice as we read in *Beowulf*, where Wealtheow entrusts her sons to Beowulf for him to instruct them with one request: *þyssum cnyhtum wes/lara liðe!* (lines 1219^b–20^a).²⁵ The young Beowulf thus combines the martial competence of a successful warrior with knowledge of *lara* (‘lore, precepts, advice’), the benefit of which is emphasized by the father in *Precepts* (line 25) as we have seen above.

Once the period of supervised instruction in approximately the ages of *cildhád* and *cnihthád* is completed, the young one is then ready to face the real world all by himself. This does not mean that his formative years have come to an end, but now the young man has to learn

²⁴ ‘But why will a man not be eager in his youth to gain himself a valuable lord and a champion, to pursue wisdom, to struggle for sagacity?’ Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 97. This poem is preserved in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 422, dated to the mid-tenth century. For a description, see N.R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957; re-issued with supplement, 1990), no. 70. For a discussion of the poem, see Patrick P. O’Neill, ‘On the Date, Provenance and Relationship of the “Solomon and Saturn” Dialogues’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 26 (1997), 139–68.

²⁵ ‘Be generous in counsel to these boys’.

autonomously, as he is encouraged to do in *Precepts: wene þec in wisdom* (line 62^a).²⁶ Putting into practice the teachings previously acquired is now paramount, but not always enough to successfully cope with the challenges of real-world situations. The young man's chances of attaining proverbial wisdom in his advanced years depend on his ability to engage with the world around him, and the basis of a senescent man's wisdom is precisely the insights gained from the accumulation of relevant life experiences, as seen in the Cotton *Maxims: and gomol snoterost, / fyrngearum frod, se þe ær feala gebideð* (*Maxims II*, lines 11^b–12).²⁷ The verb *bidan* ('to experience') defines the active nature of this stage of learning, whose significance comes from its length of time, *fyrngearum* ('in preceding years'). Such is the importance of this kind of experience that the Wanderer considers it to be an essential stage in the development of a future wise elder: *Forþon ne mæg wearþan wis wer, ær he age/wintra dæl in woruldrice* (*The Wanderer*, lines 64–65^a).²⁸

The literary evidence suggests that relevant exposure to the real world often took the form of travelling, since this is an activity rich in testing situations with which the young one would have to deal single-handedly.²⁹ In its praise of wandering as an unrivalled source of practical wisdom, Old English poetry parallels the Old Norse literary tradition, in which travelling plays a central role in shaping this society's identity.³⁰ For instance, in the gnomic poem *Hávámál* the traveller is complimented on the skills obtained through his journeys:

Sá einn veit
er víða ratar
ok hefir fiqlð um farit,

²⁶ 'Train yourself in wisdom'. Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 51.

²⁷ 'And an old man knows most things, a man made wise by distant years, who has experienced a great deal before'. Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 77. The text of *Maxims II* appears in British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B. i, dated to the mid-eleventh century by Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, no. 191. For a discussion, see Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Reading the C-Text: the After-Lives of London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. I', in *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts and their Heritage*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine M. Treharne (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 137–60.

²⁸ 'Assuredly no man can become wise before he has had a great many years in the world'.

²⁹ Cf. *The Seafarer*, lines 33^b–38.

³⁰ See Judith Jesch, 'Geography and Travel', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 119–35.

hverio geði
stýrir gumna hverr (18¹⁻⁵).³¹

Not only does travelling provide a series of much sought-after life experiences, but it also confers on the individual greater respectability among his fellow countrymen. This is the case in the Old English catalogue poem known as *Widsith* (literally ‘far-traveller’), whose eponymous minstrel adduces the experiences accumulated in his many travels as an authoritative factor in the recitation of his poem:

Swa ic geondferde fela fremdra londa
geond ginne grund; godes ond yfles
þær ic cunnade, cnosle bidæled,
freomægum feor, folgade wide.
Forþon ic mæg singan ond secgan spell (lines 50–54).³²

Literary texts do present travelling as the culminating activity in the young ones’ preparation for adulthood, since it put to the test their personal worth and previously acquired abilities, and eventually validated their position in society. Despite its evident virtues, however, travelling required a natural inclination on the part of the individual and was not suitable for everyone: *feorcyþðe beoð/selran gesohte þæm þe him selfa deah* (*Beowulf*, lines 1838^b–39).³³ The verb chosen by the Anglo-Saxon poet, *deah* (3rd sg. pres. of *dugan*), defines the attributes of the young man who wanted to venture afar: ‘to be good, strong, valiant, vigorous, manly, virtuous’.³⁴ To these desirable conditions, we may add another one singled out by the anonymous author of *Hávámál*, namely, *vitz* (‘wits’): *Vitz er þorð/þeim er víða ratar* (5¹⁻²).³⁵ The literary evidence thus suggests

³¹ *Eddadigte*, ed. by Jón Helgason (Copenhagen, 1955): ‘That one alone knows who roams widely and has travelled greatly, what kind of mind each man has’. Elizabeth Jackson, ‘“Not Simply Lists”: an Eddic Perspective on Short-Item Lists in Old English Poems’, *Speculum*, 73 (1998), 338–71, has revealed the structural and conceptual proximity between these two types of texts.

³² *Old English Minor Heroic Poems*, ed. by Joyce Hill, Durham Medieval Texts, 4 (Durham, 1994), pp. 17–20: ‘Thus I travelled through many foreign lands over the wide region; I experienced there good and evil, parted from my kindred, far from my kinsmen, I served widely. Thus I can sing and tell my story’. Cf. John D. Niles, ‘*Widsith* and the Anthropology of the Past’, *Philological Quarterly*, 78 (1999), 171–213 (p. 196). For the significance of this poem for the audience of the Exeter Book in which it is contained, see Joyce Hill, ‘*Widsith* and the Tenth Century’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 85 (1984), 305–15.

³³ ‘Distant lands are better sought by one who is himself of worth’.

³⁴ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford, 1989), s.v. *dow* v.¹ 1.

³⁵ ‘Wits are needed for those who travel widely’.

that the guided instruction the young man should have received together with his own innate qualities is instrumental in overcoming not only the perils but also the temptations awaiting him in the world outside.

What is more, in the absence of a guiding figure, young men whose training has been defective or whose probity is inadequate become more vulnerable to sin and unable to resist temptation, as illustrated by the poetic life of St Guthlac of Mercia (c. 674–714) known as *Guthlac A*: *swa bið geoguðe þeawþær þæs ealdres egsa ne styreð* (lines 419^b–20).³⁶ The prudent father in *Precepts* does not fail to advise his son against some habits that must be avoided in his path to age and wisdom:

Druncen beorg þe ond dollic word,
man on mode ond in muþe lyge,
yrre ond æfeste ond idese lufan (lines 34–36).³⁷

These practices and attitudes are considered iniquitous by the father, who believes they may hinder his son's proper maturing.

The author of *Hávamál* is more explicit in blaming this kind of behaviour for the inadequate socialization of young people. First, the effects of love for drink are mentioned:

þvíat færa veit,
er fleira drekkur,
síns til geðs gumi (12^{4–6}).³⁸

Later the negative impact on wisdom of the love for women is also singled out:

heimska ór horskom
gørir hǫlða sono
sá inn mátki munr (94^{4–6}).³⁹

The protagonist of *Guthlac A* is a good example of a man who in his youth led a dissipated life: *in þa ærestan ældu gelufade/frecnessa fela* (lines 109–10^a).⁴⁰ The way Guthlac conducts himself in his *ærestan ældu* ('first

³⁶ *Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Jane Roberts (Oxford, 1979): 'such is the custom of youth where the fear of an elder does not trouble them'.

³⁷ 'Avoid drunkenness and foolish words, sin in the heart and lies in the mouth, anger and spite and the love of women'. Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 49. Cf. *The Fortunes of Men*, lines 48–57.

³⁸ 'Since he knows less, when he drinks more, the man about his own wits'.

³⁹ 'Foolish from wise makes the sons of men that powerful desire [for women]'.

⁴⁰ '[Guthlac] loved in his youth many vicious courses'. For a discussion of age matters in *Guthlac A*, see Thomas D. Hill, 'The Age of Man and the World in the Old English *Guthlac A*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 80 (1981), 13–21.

age') is at variance with the guidelines of the father in *Precepts* and would seem to preclude Guthlac from obtaining wisdom when he reaches advanced age. But this state of affairs could be changed only through divine intervention, first, by means of the continuous supervision of an older angel who chooses to stand by Guthlac when the influence of evil is most intense.⁴¹ Later, when the saintly Guthlac becomes old, God rewards him with wisdom (*snyttru*) for his earlier experiences (*þrowinga*), which are seen as Christian in nature:

ða wæs agongen þæt him God wolde
 æfter þrowinga þonc gegyldan
 þæt he martyrhád mode gelufade;
 sealde him snyttru on sefan gehygdum,
 mægenfæste gemynd (lines 470–74^a).⁴²

Obviously Guthlac's is an extraordinary case, but it is illustrative of how the Anglo-Saxons adopted Christian discourses to justify morally their perception on the vices that menace the youth.

The problem with the period of exposure to the world is that now young men have to face difficult situations all by themselves, thus seeing the rigours of their daily existence multiply. The speaker of *The Seafarer*, a poem also preserved in the Exeter Book, makes a moving description of his personal circumstances during his period of individual exile, of separation from the community that saw him grow up:

 Þæt se mon ne wat
 þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð,
 hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ
 winter wunade wræccan lastum,
 winemægum bidroren,
 bihongen hrimgicelum; hægle scurum fleag (lines 12^b–17).⁴³

⁴¹ See Arthur Groos, 'The "Elder" Angel in *Guthlac A*', *Anglia*, 101 (1983), 141–46.

⁴² 'Then it befell that God wished to pay him thanks for his sufferings, because he loved martyrdom with his mind; he gave him wisdom in the thoughts of his mind, a steadfast mind'. For a discussion of the process of becoming wise in this poem, see Kathleen E. Dubs, 'Guthlac A and the Acquisition of Wisdom', *Neophilologus*, 65 (1981), 607–13.

⁴³ *The Seafarer*, ed. by I.L. Gordon (New York, 1966): 'That man does not know, whom it befalls most fairly on land, how I, wretched and sorrowful, remained years on the ice-cold sea, in the paths of exile, bereaved of dear kinsmen, hung around by icicles; hail flew in showers'. Cf. *Deor*, lines 1–6.

This feeling of loneliness, evidently aggravated by exile in the case of the Seafarer, reflects the harsh reality of travelling that awaited the Anglo-Saxon youth, now nostalgic both of his home and of his tutors as happens to the Wanderer in a somnial experience.⁴⁴ While *dælt er heima hvat* ('anything will do at home', line 5³) as stated in *Hávámál*, the lonely traveller in contrast has to deal with a risk-filled world and life-threatening encounters that too often end with the young one's death, as is warned in the Exeter Book gnomic poem *The Fortunes of Men*:

Sumum þæt gegongeð on geoguðfeore
þæt se endestæf earfedmæcgum
wealic weorþeð (lines 10–12^a).⁴⁵

This period of *wintra dæl in woruldice* (*The Wanderer*, line 65^a), of an extended experience in the world,⁴⁶ the successful completion of which is presented in the texts as a requirement for ageing wisdom, marks the end of the process of growing from boy to man. The effects of travelling on the youth's development are best summed up in the following testimony taken from the Old Norse literary corpus, which is indicative of the affinity between Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards age:

Nú er annan veg þeira lífi er upp vaxa með fǫður sínum ok þykkia yðr einskis háttar hía yðr, en þá er þeir eru frumvaxta, fara land af landi ok þykkia þar mestháttar sem þá koma þeir, koma við þat út ok þykkias þá hǫfðingium meiri.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Cf. lines 37–44. For a discussion, see Antonina Harbus, 'Deceptive Dreams in *The Wanderer*', *Studies in Philology*, 93 (1996), 164–79.

⁴⁵ 'It happens to some unlucky men that the end of their lives comes unhappily in youth'. Trans. by Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, p. 59. There follows a long *þula* or 'catalogue' of the various circumstances that may cause the death of young men (lines 12^b–57; cf. *Beowulf*, lines 1761–68). For a discussion, see Karen Swenson, 'Death Appropriated in *The Fates of Men*', *Studies in Philology*, 88 (1991), 123–39.

⁴⁶ The etymological sense of the word *world* is indicative of its signification in Anglo-Saxon times: Mod. Eng. *world* < OE *weorold*, a combination of *wer* ('man') and *eald* ('time, age life'), thus meaning 'the time of man'. I cite this etymology from Ashley Crandell Amos, 'Old English Words for *Old*', in *Ageing and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990), pp. 95–106 (pp. 95–96); cf. C.T. Onions with the assistance of G.W.S. Friedrichsen and R.W. Burchfield, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford, 1966), s.v. *world*.

⁴⁷ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ed. by Jón Helgason (Copenhagen, 1955), p. 31: 'Now, for those who grow up with their father, their life is another way, and they seem to you, by your side, of no importance; but when they grow up, they travel from land to land, and there they seem of the greatest importance; just as when they return, they come home and they consider themselves greater than chiefs'.

The servant woman who pronounces these words explains the social dimension of the two stages mentioned above. While the boys are under the tutelage of an elder—in this case only their father—they keep a low profile, but once they have completed with success their voyaging stint in their youth and return home, they are regarded as adults and acquire greater social prominence. A similar thread can be seen in Old English literature, as the *Durham Proverbs* also comment on the self-aggrandizing effects of travelling on some young men: *Hwon gelpeð se þe wide siþað*.⁴⁸

The passage from childhood to adulthood involved the basic training and education of the boy for his later survival as a young man, and was decisive for the continuity of the community's way of life. However, there are instances in Old English poetry that show how certain individuals could transcend the normal *cursus aetatis*. The biological polarity between youth and age, respectively characterized by *fortitudo* and *sapientia*, can be seen to vanish in the case of a young man who has attained the wisdom typical of the elderly. We find one example in *Andreas*, the Old English poetical life of St Andrew preserved in the Vercelli Book, where God appears to St Andrew in the form of an expert sailor:

Du eart seolfa geong,
wigendra hleo, nalas wintrum frod;
hafast þeh on fyrhðe, faroðlacende,
eorles ondsware. Æghwylces canst
worda for worulde wislic andgit (lines 505^b–09).⁴⁹

Despite being young (*geong*), he is praised for displaying the kind of intelligence more usually associated with an older man (*eorl*). This is not a unique case in Old English literature, nor is it specific to the Anglo-

⁴⁸ Olf Arngart, 'Durham Proverbs', *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 288–300 (p. 295): 'A little boasts he who travels widely'. This collection of proverbs appears in Durham, Cathedral MS B. III. 32, dating from the first half of the eleventh century; see Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, no. 107.

⁴⁹ *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles*, ed. by Kenneth R. Brooks (Oxford, 1961; repr. 1998): 'You are yourself young, protector of men, and not at all old in years; nevertheless, you have the ability, seafarer, to answer like an old man. You know the true significance of every man's words in the world'. The Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, MS CXVII) is dated to the second half of the tenth century; see Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, no. 394. For a discussion of the manuscript, see Maureen Halsall, 'Vercelli and the Vercelli Book,' *PMLA*, 84 (1969), 1545–50, and D.G. Scragg, 'The Compilation of the Vercelli Book', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2 (1973), 189–207.

Saxons, but this topos, known as *puer senex* or *puer senilis* ('aged youth'), is present in European literatures since classical times.⁵⁰

The most prominent *puer senex* in Old English is Beowulf himself, complimented by the old Hrothgar during the festivities following the death of Grendel's mother in these terms:

ne hyrde ic snotorlicor
on swa geongum feore guman þingian.
Ðu eart mægenes strang, ond on mode frod,
wis wordcwida! (lines 1842^b–45^a)⁵¹

Hrothgar sees combined in the person of Beowulf the strength (*strang*) normal for his young age (*geongum feore*) with the wise language (*wis wordcwida*) characteristic of advanced years (*mode frod*). This unequivocal concentration of attributes central to the Anglo-Saxon society contributes to magnifying the protagonist into epic proportions and to projecting him as the embodiment of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal.⁵² As a result, Beowulf appears as a literary model whose achievements are unattainable to lesser mortals but whom strong youths should strive to emulate.

Only young people could hope to follow the example of Beowulf, since his heroic ideal appears to be beyond the reach of elders, who fail to keep their juvenile vigour.⁵³ Hrothgar is a good case in point: all

⁵⁰ For the presence of this commonplace in classical and medieval literature, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 98–101. Also relevant is the discussion in J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: a Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 123–34.

⁵¹ 'I have never heard a man talk more wisely at so young an age. You are strong in your might, aged in your mind, wise in your speech'. For a study of the hero's youth, see George J. Engelhardt, 'On the Sequence of Beowulf's *Geogoð*', *Modern Language Notes*, 68 (1953), 91–95. *Beowulf* is preserved in British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, copied between the tenth and eleventh centuries; see Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, no. 216, and Kevin S. Kiernan, 'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript (New Brunswick, 1981). The date of composition of the poem has been highly debated. For a recent overview of the controversy over the date of *Beowulf*, see Roberta Frank, 'A Scandal in Toronto: The Dating of *Beowulf* a Quarter-Century On', *Speculum*, 82 (2007), 843–64.

⁵² See Kaske, 'Sapientia et Fortitudo in *Beowulf*'. For the development of the heroic ideal of *fortitudo et sapientia* in the classical and Christian tradition, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 173–78. For a survey of the topos in Old English literature, see Thomas D. Hill, 'The Crowning of Alfred and the Topos of *Sapientia et Fortitudo* in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *Neophilologus*, 86 (2002), 471–76.

⁵³ As Kaske argues, in the case of Hrothgar, the references to his *fortitudo* 'can all be interpreted without violence as references to something other than the literal present' ('*Sapientia et Fortitudo* in *Beowulf*', p. 279; see n. 22). Although there is a slight diminu-

the strength of his youth has vanished in his old age as one can gather from Beowulf's account to Hygelac:

hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwiðan,
hildestrengo; hreðer inne weoll,
þonne he wintrum frod worn gemunde (lines 2111–14).⁵⁴

While Hrothgar has obtained the wisdom corresponding to his old age, he would have rather retained his youthful and warrior-type fortitude to at least fend off Grendel's attacks. And it is old age precisely that is blamed for having deprived Hrothgar of his previous robustness:

þæt wæs an cyning
æghwæs orleahstre, oþ þæt hine ylðo benam
mægenes wynnum, se þe oft manegum scod (lines 1885^b–87)⁵⁵

It should come as no surprise that Hrothgar thinks of old age in connection with the evils that beset people's welfare,⁵⁶ and that it should have such negative connotations for the Danish king, who describes old age with the adjective *atol* ('dire, terrific, terrible, horrid, foul, loathsome').⁵⁷ Obviously, in a society extremely dependent on physical strength, the privation entailed by old age together with its proximity to death explains why Hrothgar's opinion is so unfavourable to senescence.

In view of these considerations, it seems reasonable to think that old age was approached by the Anglo-Saxons at least with some reservations, and thus the following judgement by John Burrow needs to be re-examined:

tion in Beowulf's hardiness, he manages to be until the moment of death prodigiously strong for his advanced age (probably an octogenarian), although this is not enough to withstand the dragon's paralyzing fire. See John C. Pope, 'Beowulf's Old Age', in *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature, in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt*, ed. by James L. Rosier (The Hague, 1970), pp. 55–64.

⁵⁴ 'At times, fettered by age, the old warrior proceeded to lament the strength of battle of his youth; the heart surged within when he, wise with winters, recalled many things'.

⁵⁵ 'That was a king blameless in every respect, until old age, which has often harmed many, deprived him of the joys of his strength'.

⁵⁶ *Wunað he on twist; no hine wiht dweleð/adl ne ylðo* (lines 1735–36^b): 'He dwells in prosperity; nothing hinders him at all, sickness or age'. Cf. *The Seafarer*, lines 70–71, where old age is cited among the possible causes of death along with two other evils, viz. sickness and violence.

⁵⁷ Meaning cited from *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. by Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller (Oxford, 1898; repr. 1980), s.v. *atol*.

their [i.e. the Anglo-Saxons'] stress on the moral and spiritual superiority of the old is such that, if we were to follow Philippe Ariès in supposing that every period of history favours or privileges one among the ages of man, the only possible choice for the Anglo-Saxon period would be *senectus*.⁵⁸

In his idealistic estimation of the Anglo-Saxon attitude towards old people, Burrow appears to ignore the negative connotations of old age, like the ones discussed above, and bases his argument of its 'moral and spiritual superiority' only on the *sapientia* stored by age. Yet, the inefficacy of *sapientia* devoid of *fortitudo*, as happens in the age of *senectus*, is what is clearly best illustrated by the plot of *Beowulf*. The titular hero of the poem comes to the rescue of the Danish nation, who are defenceless against the onslaught of the monster Grendel because the qualities of *sapientia* and *fortitudo* occur in unbalanced proportions: '*Sapientia* is there [i.e. in Denmark] in great variety [...] but] we hear nothing about present Danish *fortitudo* and a good deal about its absence'.⁵⁹ In his speech after the fight between Beowulf and Grendel, Hrothgar acknowledges his people's limitations in martial matters:

Nu scealc hafað
 þurh Drihtnes miht dæd gefremede,
 ðe we ealle ær ne meahton
 snyttrum besyrwan (lines 939^b–42^a).⁶⁰

That is to say, in spite of their abundant *snyttru* ('practical cleverness'), the Danes' lack of youthful vigour to implement it makes the Danish nation vulnerable, just as elderly people are as they become increasingly frail. As suggested by the old Byrhtwold after the death of his aged leader Byrhtnoth in the literary account of the Battle of Maldon (991), there seems to be only one course of action left when facing old age: *Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað* (lines 312–13).⁶¹ Byrhtwold here acknowledges that, in the face of the manifest decline of the physical conditions of an old

⁵⁸ *Ages of Man*, p. 109. The allusion to Ariès refers to his *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London, 1962). Burrow, p. 108, rejects *juventus* as the preferred age of the Anglo-Saxons after a remark in the *Dicts of Cato*.

⁵⁹ Kaske, '*Sapientia et Fortitudo in Beowulf*', p. 286.

⁶⁰ 'Now through the might of the Lord, a warrior has carried out an action that we all could not accomplish before by skill'. Cf. also lines 1723–27.

⁶¹ *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. by E.V. Gordon (London, 1957): 'Courage shall be more resolute, the heart bolder, the spirit shall be greater, as our strength grows weaker'.

man, his only possible contribution to society lies in the cultivation of skills related not to his bodily but to his mental strength (i.e. *hige*, *heorte*, *mod*). Byrhtwold's famous words are better understood when we read the contemporary description Ælfric makes of the body of an elderly person, whose attributes are unlikely to be those of an ideal age:

[W]itodlice on ealdlicum gearum bið ðæs mannes wæstm gebiged. his swura áslacod. his neb bið gerifod. 7 his leomu ealle gewæhte; His breost bið mid siccetungum gepread. 7 betwux wordum his orþung ateorað.⁶²

Ælfric here perpetuates the stereotype of old age as a period of physical decline and decrepitude.⁶³

Consequently and on account of the literary evidence available, it seems difficult to maintain that *senectus* was perceived as the preferred age by the Anglo-Saxons. A similar view is held by archaeologists, who have also shown that mortuary evidence dating from the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon period reflects 'a diminished status for older adults in the burial ritual, and have linked this to a diminished status for the elderly in early medieval society'.⁶⁴ If we want to further explore the Anglo-Saxon sentiments about which could be the best period in a man's life, King Alfred (r. 871–99) gives us a good indication in his translation of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*,⁶⁵ with the Latin original *perfecta aetate* ('perfect age') rendered as *fulfremedre ielde* ('completed age').⁶⁶ For

⁶² 'Dominica II in Adventum Domini', in *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: the First Series, Text*, ed. by Peter Clemoes, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series, 17 (Oxford, 1997), p. 528: 'But in old years the man's stature is bowed, his neck becomes slack, his face is wrinkled, and all his limbs weakened; his breast is oppressed with sighs, and between words his breath fails'. See Godden, *Ælfric Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, p. 339.

⁶³ For medieval descriptions of the old body, see Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain'*, trans. by Yael Lotan (London, 1997), pp. 36–59. For the representation of old age in the Icelandic sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Spectre of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Journal of English and German Philology*, 104 (2005), 297–325. See also Ármann Jakobsson and Jon Viðar Sigurðsson, this volume.

⁶⁴ Sally Crawford, "'Gomol is snoterost': Growing Old in Anglo-Saxon England", in *'Collectanea Antiqua': Essays in Memory of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes*, ed. by Martin Henig and Tyler Jo Smith, British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 1673 (Oxford, 2007), p. 53.

⁶⁵ *Patrologia Latina*, LXXVII, 98. For biographical information and bibliographical references, see Patrick Wormald, 'Alfred (848/9–899)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, I, 716–25.

⁶⁶ *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. by Henry Sweet, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 50 (London, 1872), p. 385. For a discussion of the Old English translation and its influence, see R.W. Clement, 'The Production of

King Alfred this *ield* corresponds to the period when both the physical development and the training of the individual have been completed, and he agrees in choosing the same modifier as Ælfric would later do when introducing the form *fulfremeda* to describe the age period following youth as we saw above. There is nothing unusual in the fact that neither King Alfred nor Ælfric a century later designate this age with a denotative noun since, as Mary Dover points out, it is difficult to find ‘any explicit reference in medieval English literature to an age intervening between youth and old age’.⁶⁷ Likewise, when *The Fortunes of Men* gives details of the social circumstances accompanying this age period, no specific noun is used:

Sum sceal on geoguþe mid godes meahtum
his earfoðsiþ calne forspildan,
ond on ylðo eft eadig weorþan,
wunian wyndagum ond welan þicgan,
maþmas ond meoduful mægburge on,
þæs þe ænig fira mæge forð gehealdan (lines 58–63).⁶⁸

Once the hardships typical of *earfoðsiþ*, juvenile years (which interestingly means ‘troublesome journey’), have been overcome, the poet proceeds to talk about the *ylðo eft* (‘age afterwards’), that is, about the period immediately following youth, not about old age.⁶⁹ And his position on this middle age is quite enthusiastic: this is the time of the *wyndagum* (‘days of gladness’), and those who have lived to enjoy them should consider themselves fortunate. This age period is presented as an earthly

the Pastoral Care: King Alfred and his Helpers’, in *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose*, ed. by Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, NY, 1986), pp. 129–52, and David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 193–209.

⁶⁷ *Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 5. Engelhardt, ‘Beowulf's *Geogod*’, p. 92, explains that ‘between the poles of youth and age extends an intermediate period, the members of which are often designated collectively as “*duguð*”’. The term *duguð* (‘body of noble retainers, people, men, nobles, the nobility’), however, is not used to describe an age group but normally refers to warriors of indeterminate age. Note that Old Norse-Icelandic also does not describe this period with a specific noun: *frumvaxta* (‘in one's prime’), *full-orðinn* (‘full-grown, of age’), *full-proskadr* (‘full-grown’), *roskinn* (‘ripe, mature, full-grown, adult’): Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1957).

⁶⁸ ‘Through the power of God, one must do away with his troubles in his youth, and in the age afterwards be fortunate, live through joyful days, and receive riches, treasures and the mead-cup in the home of his family, as much as any may continue to have these’.

⁶⁹ The text suggests direct continuity from youth, so in this context *ylðo* should be understood as ‘age, time of life, years; *aetas*’, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *ild*, II.

reward for all the tribulations endured in the preceding years, and as a time in which a man should savour the joys of the hall (e.g. the *mead-ful*, ‘mead-cup’) before the signs of age start to creep in and gradually diminish his capacity for happiness. It corresponds to the period Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) designates *gravitas*, which he defines as *declinatio a iuventute in senectutem, nondum senectus, sed iam nondum iuventus*.⁷⁰ The literary evidence, thus, seems to suggest that this transitional period between youth and old age, this *fulfremeda wæstm*, has all the ingredients to have been constructed by the collective imaginary of the Anglo-Saxons as the perfect age.

To conclude, the Old English literary corpus appears to articulate a relatively coherent vision of the cycle of human life, and considering the heterogeneity of the textual sources available, we can surmise that to a certain extent this can only be so because the texts must somehow relate to actual perceptions and/or practices in pre-Conquest England. Bearing in mind that all textual testimonies consulted are dated between the late ninth to the mid-eleventh centuries, it should come as no surprise that in some aspects they show affinity with Old Norse texts, since this was precisely the period of most intense Anglo-Scandinavian contact.⁷¹ It is also reasonable to think that the literary discourse on age influenced the members of the audience, who saw in literature an ideal model of social conduct.⁷² At some times in a direct way as in sapiential writings, and at other times more implicitly as in *Beowulf*, Old English literature makes judgements on each one of the ages of man and defines the cultural expectations that society had invested in them, thus encouraging its audience to behave in a certain way depending on the age cohort they belonged to. First, during *cildhād* boys should receive direct instruction from their father in rules of conduct and social values. Approximately around the age of seven, they might be sent away for fosterage to complete their education in more practical matters during their *cnihthād*. These two stages of guided instruction

⁷⁰ *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. by W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911), 11.2.6: ‘the decline from youth into old age, not yet old, but already not young’. See Joseph de Ghellinck, ‘Iuventus, Gravitas, Senectus’, in *Studia Mediaevalia in Honorem admodum Reverend Patris Raymundi Josephi Martin* (Bruges, 1948), pp. 39–59.

⁷¹ See J.D. Richards, *Viking Age England* (Stroud, 2004). Also useful is the collection of essays *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. by Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (Turnhout, 2000).

⁷² For the problem of defining an audience for Old English texts, see Hugh Magennis, ‘Audience(s), Reception, Literacy’, in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, pp. 84–101.

should prepare the boy for *geogoð*, the most crucial and demanding period in the development of an Anglo-Saxon male. Now young men had to deal independently with vital uncertainty and mortal dangers without any external guidance while leading a joyless life.⁷³ They were recompensed for their efforts in the next age, *fulfremeda wæstm*, favourite among the Anglo-Saxons, when men enjoyed the pleasures of life while maintaining full mental and physical powers. In spite of the physical deterioration of *yld*, literary texts promote respect for the elders because of their extensive experience and their proverbial wisdom, which made them still useful to the community.⁷⁴

Without giving much precise chronological information about age cohorts, which would have been unnecessary for contemporary audiences, literary texts show concern in raising awareness about the social dimension of biological growth: common good could be best attained if the members of each age group conducted themselves according to the community's needs and expectations. This biological model was constructed in literary works upon two qualities of notable cultural centrality in pre-Conquest England, namely, *sapientia* and *fortitudo*, the worth of each age group depending on their share of and balance between these two virtues. Thus, the best combination of wisdom and strength was to be found neither among elderly people, limited by their physical decline, nor among young and pre-juvenile males, whose capacity of judgement remained yet undeveloped. Instead, it was the middle age or *gravitas*, the period intervening between youth and age, that could be most useful to society and was presented in Old English literature with ideal connotations.

⁷³ A gnomic passage in the Exeter Book's poem known as *The Wife's Lament* refers to the happiness of a *geong mon* ('young man') in this way: *Sy æt him sylfum gelong/eal his worulde wyn* (lines 45^b–46^a); ed. by R.F. Leslie in *The Old English Elegies* (Exeter, 1988): 'whether he is dependent on himself alone for all his happiness in the world'. As Ashby Kinch, 'The Ethical Agency of the Female Lyric Voice: *The Wife's Lament* and Catullus 64', *Studies in Philology*, 103 (2006), 121–52, comments on these lines, 'according to Germanic cultural norms, a joy reliant on the self is no joy at all, since the isolated individual lacks those joys of the hall so essential to a social identity' (p. 145).

⁷⁴ Cf. Crawford, 'Growing Old in Anglo-Saxon England', pp. 55–59.

BECOMING 'OLD', AGEISM AND TAKING CARE OF THE ELDERLY IN ICELAND C. 900–1300

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson

Introduction

The focus in this chapter will be on three closely linked aspects of growing old in medieval Iceland. The first part will have as a focal point when did one become old, the second will centre on attitudes towards the elderly, and the final one will deal with how Icelandic society looked after its aged members.

When dealing with the above mentioned aspects, we are facing two major source problems. The first one is that there is so little information about the old in the sagas and the laws. The second one is associated with the sagas, particularly the Icelandic family sagas. There is general agreement among scholars that the *samtíðarsögur*, contemporary sagas, e.g. the *Sturlunga saga* collection, are reliable sources. All historians who have used them have felt able to rely on them utterly, because of the short time between the events and the recording of the sagas, normally about 20–70 years. *Íslendinga saga*, the most extensive and important of the sagas in *Sturlunga saga*, was, for example, written down in the period 1264–84, around 10–60 years after the events it describes.¹ Jesse L. Byock represents one view when he states that the *samtíðarsögur* were written for a contemporary audience, which knew the farms, the events and the participants. People would have reacted to a lack of important details or a distortion of the events.²

The Icelandic family sagas, *Íslendingasögur*, were written down in the same period as the contemporary sagas. As these depict the Saga Age (c. 930–1030), this causes greater source problems. For more than two hundred years scholars have disagreed on the reliability of *Íslendingasögur*. Two opposing views of the question developed in the nineteenth century.

¹ For an overview over the discussion about the source problems see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. by Jean Lundskær-Nielsen, The Viking Collection, 12 (Odense, 1999).

² Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley, 1988), 34.

The free-prose theorists maintain that the *Íslendingasögur* were preserved, with only minor changes from the oral tradition, from the time of the events they describe in the tenth and early eleventh centuries until they came to be written down in the thirteenth. Thus, the free-prose theorists believe these sagas to be reliable. The basic idea underpinning the book-prose theory is that all Icelandic family sagas were written by authors, who worked and thought like modern authors, using and adapting their materials as it suited them best. Source-critical scholars have, like the book-prose theorists, emphasised that the Icelandic family sagas cannot be used as sources for the Saga Age. The views of the book-prose theorists and source critics came to dominate scholarship for most of the last century, so that the *Íslendingasögur* eventually came to be abandoned as historical sources.

Around 1970, and in keeping with social anthropological influences in historical thought, *Íslendingasögur* were on the agenda once more, with scholars now using them to discuss the period from the middle of the twelfth to the end of the thirteenth century.³ However, viewing *Íslendingasögur* as such evidence by no means solves the problems connected to their use as sources. Why should we prefer *Íslendingasögur* over *samtíðarsögur* in discussing Icelandic society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries?

One important element in the discussion about the use of *Íslendingasögur* as historical sources is the question of the level of continuity in the way society developed. Was there much social continuity or little throughout time? If there was little continuity between the beginning of the tenth century and the end of the twelfth, it is difficult to argue in favour of the use of *Íslendingasögur* as reliable sources. But if we assume that there was a high level of social continuity, these can be used as 'models of and for Icelandic social life as it lasted over several centuries'.⁴

I think there are reasons to assume a high level of continuity in many areas, for example in the kinship systems, in ways of resolving conflicts, ways of doing business, in what was considered acceptable and unacceptable conduct, in the level of generosity expected, in duties between friends and the attitudes towards the old. But, the authors of

³ See, e.g., William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990).

⁴ Victor W. Turner, 'An Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga', *The Translation of Culture. Essays to E.E. Evans-Pitchard*, ed. by T.O. Beidelman (London, 1971), 358.

Íslendingasögur realised that there had been changes in society. This can be seen if we study the patterns of conflict in the sagas. There was a difference between feuds in the family sagas, involving 20–30 individuals and battles depicted in the contemporary sagas, e.g. the Battle of Örylgsstaðir in 1238, where almost 3000 men was engaged.

I do not think that we have any cause to doubt *Íslendingasögur* when they tell us that most conflicts occurred between small units in the period 930–1030. But we will never be able to prove that all the characters really existed or that events happened exactly as described. The bottom line is that we can't get any closer to the social structure of the Saga Age than permitted by the Icelandic family sagas. By focussing on the description of society in every single saga and the picture of society that they present as a whole, we can *grasp* the main features of the way society was organised and the attitudes towards old in the period covered by the sagas.

Returning to the theme of this paper, it is unlikely that the introduction of Christianity had any effect on the attitude towards the old. As the following discussion will show there is no difference in the negative attitudes towards the old as represented in *Íslendingasögur* and *samtíðarsögur*. It is difficult to argue that the new religion advocated more severe prescriptions concerning treatment of the old than did the old religion. As no significant changes in attitudes towards the elderly can be discerned in the saga texts, we should consider the period c. 900–1300 as a whole.

When was 'Old' in Iceland?

Today we divide our lives roughly into four main stages: childhood from birth until 12 (or the onset of puberty), youth between 12 and 20, adulthood from c. 20 until we give up working, then we have reached old age.⁵ Iceland in the Middle Ages had no such intermediary youth

⁵ For overview of the debate about the Old in Europe see, for example, Bessie Ellen Richardson, *Old Age among the Ancient Greeks. The Greek Portrayal of Old Age in Literature, Art and Inscriptions with a Study of the Duration of Life among the Ancient Greeks on the Basis of Inscriptional Evidence*, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Archaeology, 16 (New York, 1969 [1933]); Robert R. Sears and S. Shirley Feldman, *The Seven Ages of Man* (Los Altos, 1973); Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, NJ, 1986); J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: a Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986); Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge, 1986); Judith De Luce and Thomas M. Falkner, *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, SUNY

group classification, society was comprised of just children, adults and old people, mostly children and grown-ups.⁶ This notion about the three stages of life, which we find in all cultures,⁷ cannot, however, have been mixed with the learned European discussion about the ages of man.⁸ Even though the reflection of this debate did find its way to Iceland, as we clearly can see in religious texts such as *The Icelandic Homily Book*⁹ and *Alfræði Íslenzk*,¹⁰ which divide the ages of man into the four stages of child, young adults, people in prime of life, and the elderly, it did not influence the common division of stages of life.

The transition from childhood to adult or the grown-up stage usually took place between 12 and 16, but sometimes a person became a member of the grown-up group before 12 and occasionally after

Series in Classical Studies (Albany, NY, 1989); Michael Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: the Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought 1250–1350* (Lanham, MD, 1989); *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Michael M. Sheehan, Papers in Mediaeval Studies, 11 (Toronto, 1990); *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith, Studies in the Social History of Medicine (London, 1991); Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1996); Tim G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: a Cultural and Social History*, Ancient Society and History (Baltimore, 2003); For Iceland see, for example, Johan Hovstad, *Mannen og samfunnet. Studiar i norrøn etikk* (Oslo, 1943); *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, 1–22, ed. by Finn Hødnebo et al. (Oslo, 1956–1978, 2nd edn 1980–1982), I, pp. 69–71; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Börn og gamalmenni á þjóðveldisöld’, in *Yfir Íslandsála. Afmælisrit til heiðurs Magnúsi Stefánssyni sextugum 25. desember 1991*, ed. by Gunnar Karlsson and Helgi Þorláksson (Reykjavík, 1991), pp. 111–30; Gillian R. Overing, ‘A Body in Question: Aging, Community, and Gender in Medieval Iceland’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 29 (1999), 211–25; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 104 (2005), 297–325; *Míðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík 2005).

⁶ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Börn og gamalmenni á þjóðveldisöld’.

⁷ Jon Hendricks and Cynthia A. Leedham, ‘Making Sense: Interpreting Historical and Cross-Cultural Literature on Aging’, in *Perceptions of Aging in Literature: a Cross-Cultural Study*, ed. by Patricia Spencer Soper and Prisca von Dorotka Bagnell, Contributions to the Study of Aging, 11 (New York, 1989), pp. 1–16 (p. 6).

⁸ See, for example, D.P. Kirby, *The Making of Early England* (London, 1967); Sears and Feldman, *The Seven Ages of Man*; Sears, *The Ages of Man*; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*; Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life*; John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: the Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1988); Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age*; Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*.

⁹ *Hómiliubók. Íslenska homilíur eftir en handskrift frá 12. árh.*, ed. by Theodor Wisen (Lund, 1872), pp. 47, 49, 204, 230.

¹⁰ *Alfræði íslenzk. Íslensk encyklopædisk litteratur*, ed. by Kristian Kålund, 3 vols, (Copenhagen, 1908), III, p. 98.

16. This is clearly seen in the terms *barn*,¹¹ *frumvaxti*,¹² *maðr*,¹³ *sveinn*,¹⁴ *mær*,¹⁵ and *meystelpa*¹⁶ which generally described young men and women between 12 and 16 winters of age.

The reason for this unclear transformation from one stage to another is that age was defined according to its function. A child became an adult when it could execute tasks society demanded from a full-grown person. Similarly, mature individuals became ‘old’ when they could no longer fulfil the tasks society required of them. Clearly illustrating this notion is *Íslendinga saga*’s description of Ögmundr *sneis*, a robust yet aged retainer of Þórarinn Jónsson in AD 1234: *var hann þá á inum átta tigi vetra. Ok sögðu menn svá, at hann þætti þar þá maðr vígligastr í því liði*.¹⁷ In *Laxdæla saga* Hrútr Herjólfsson, at the age of 80, gained honour for killing the thief who had stolen horses from Þorleikr Höskuldsson.¹⁸ Being aged did not mean that these men were to be considered ‘old’.

The terms usually used to describe old age in all type of sagas are *gamall* and *elli*. *Gamall* usually was used to characterize individuals that were biologically old but still running their farms or working as servants; or occasionally, for persons that had ‘retired’ and could not work any

¹¹ *Biskupa sögur I*, ed. by Sigurgeir Steingrímsson et al., Íslenzk fornrit, 15 (Reykjavík, 2003), pp. 176–78; *Grágás. Konungsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1852–70), 2 vols, 1a, p. 23; *Grágás. Efter det Arnemagnæanske haandskrift, nr. 334 fol.*, *Staðarhólsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1879), p. 107; *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 9 (Reykjavík, 1956), pp. 72–73, 78–79.

¹² *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, p. 242; *Laxdæla saga. Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar. Stífs þáttir*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 5 (Reykjavík, 1934), p. 49.

¹³ *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 1a, p. 166; 1b, p. 215; *Grágás. Staðarhólsbók*, p. 5, 333; *Eyfirðinga sögur*, p. 40; *Ljósvetninga saga með þátturnum. Reykdæla saga ok Víga-Skútu. Hreiðars þáttir*, ed. by Björn Sigfússon, Íslenzk fornrit, 10 (Reykjavík, 1940), p. 192.

¹⁴ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, p. 80; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 27; *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Björn K. Þórólfsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), p. 92; *Vatnsdæla saga, Hallfredar saga, Kormáks saga, Hrómundar þáttir halta, Hrafnis þáttir Guðrúnarsonar*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), pp. 61, 110–12; *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), p. 177; *Biskupa sögur I*, p. 178; *Biskupa sögur II*, ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 16 (Reykjavík, 2002), p. 199; *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson et al., 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), I, p. 229; II, p. 105.

¹⁵ *Biskupa sögur II*, p. 229.

¹⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 323.

¹⁷ *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 371–72: ‘he was now between 70 and 80 years old, but people said that he looked like the most able warrior in the group.’ *Grágás* partly reveal this functional definition in the paragraph that men aged 80 or more could not get married without the consent of their heirs: *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 1b, p. 224. Cf. *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 314; *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 183; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Börn og gamalmenn á þjóðveldisöld’: Overring, ‘A Body in Question’. Cf. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World*.

¹⁸ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 105: ‘þótti hann hann mikít hafa vaxit af þessu verki’.

more.¹⁹ *Ell*i, however, was used more often than *gamall* to portray a retired person. A common phrase in the sagas is that a man lived on his farm to *elli*,²⁰ that is, he ran his farm until he was forced to retire. The three main stages of life had, of course, many different levels, i.e. between a person who had just entered the grown-up group and a person in the prime of his/her life,²¹ and between *elli* and *hrumr af elli* ('decrepit from old age'),²² the latter term stressing the fact that there was not much left to life.

In the sagas, having a disability—especially becoming blind—and getting 'old' are frequently linked together.²³ When a person became infirm, he or she could no longer complete jobs expected from grown-ups and thus had to rely on others. Getting 'old' was equivalent to being unable to work or carry out adult responsibilities, and it was then of no importance whether the person in question was 50, 60 or 80 years old.²⁴ Therefore, most of the so-called *ómagar*²⁵ ('poor, dependent or incapable persons') were subsequently a part of this group. I would nevertheless like to underline one important exception, namely that a person who was born handicapped or became so at a young age received training in many cases. Stúfr *blindi* (the blind) was one of the skalds to the Norwegian kings Magnús Ólafsson *góði* and Haraldr Sigurðsson *harðráði*. Ásbjörn *blindi* was a workman on the farm Þjóðólfshöfn in Hvammssveit in 1227. This attitude is in accordance with stanza 71 in *Hávamál*.²⁶

¹⁹ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, pp. 16, 150–51, 173, 231–32, 257, 277, 294, 299.

²⁰ See, for example, *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 6, 13, 48, 111: 'ætti lítt við elli at fäsk'; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 60.

²¹ *Vestfirðinga sögur*, p. 347: '[v]ar Hallgrímur þá átján vetra gamall ok þóti líkligir til afreksmann, þá er væri fullþroskaðr'.

²² *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, p. 173; *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 6, 13, 48, 58.

²³ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, p. 277; *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 228–29; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 60; *Austfirðinga sögur*, pp. 91, 96–97; *Ljósvefninga saga með þátum*, p. 54; *Austfirðinga sögur*, pp. 17, 69, 216.

²⁴ There is therefore no similarity between this system and the classical age class system, where fixed rank is associated with age: Bernardo Bernardi, *Age Class Systems: Social Institutions and Politics Based on Age*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, 57 (Cambridge, 1985).

²⁵ Wolfgang Gerhold, *Armut und Armenfürsorge im mittelalterlichen Island*, Skandinavistische Arbeiten, 18 (Heidelberg, 2002).

²⁶ *Eddadigle I*, ed. by Jón Helgason (Oslo, 1971). All translation from *Hávamál*, <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/havamal.html>: 'The lame can ride horse, the handless drive cattle,/the deaf one can fight and prevail,/tis happier for the blind than for him on the bale-fire,/but no man hath care for a corpse'.

Haltr ríðr hrossi,
 hjörð rekr handarvanr;
 daufr vegr ok dugir;
 blindr er betri
 en brenndr sé,
 nýtr manngi nás.

The transformation from one stage of life to another was in most cases gradual. Young people had to prove themselves through different tasks before they entered the stage of adulthood.²⁷ Each household member worked as long as he or she could, then it was presumably the householder who determined when they had become ‘old’. For the householder himself, it was most likely he who decided when it was time to step down and give place for his heirs.²⁸ In both circumstances, the transformation entailed loss of certain rights and social position. Consequently, household members had incentive and endeavoured to remain productive as long as possible. It is the person’s ability to work which is the central element in this definition of ‘old’. The group we focus on here are therefore individuals over c. 12 winters of age that could not fulfil the tasks the society demanded from the grown-ups. In most cases these were also biologically old.

The group of ‘old’ must therefore be distinguished from the biologically old which most scholars have focused on, for example, William Ian Miller in his article ‘Beating Up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities: A Social Historical Inquiry into Literary Sources’ where he discusses the dispute between Mörðr Valgarðsson and Hrútr Herjólfsson in *Brennu-Njáls saga* and his ‘hunch’ is that Mörðr was counting on Hrútr’s ‘sense of propriety not to dishonour himself by challenging an old man to duel.’²⁹ While it is true that one did not get honour by fighting someone below oneself in the social hierarchy, in this scenario one householder is challenging another and it is the social position that determines the individual’s social status, not biological age.

²⁷ See Nic Percivall and Carolyne Larrington, this volume, for discussions of transitional steps towards adulthood in legal and saga texts.

²⁸ Cf. Burrow, *The Ages of Man*.

²⁹ William Ian Miller, ‘Beating Up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities: A Social Historical Inquiry into Literary Sources’, *Mercer Law Review*, 39 (1988), 753–766 (p. 756); Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*. See also Overing, ‘A Body in Question’; Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Oxford, 2002); Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Specter of Old Age’.

Ageism

Ageism,³⁰ defined as a prejudice against one who is old, is best illustrated by an episode from the family saga *Egils saga*. Egill Skalla-Grímsson, a great and brutal warrior and a local chieftain, is without a doubt one of Iceland's finest sons. But the misfortune in his life was in becoming old and had to step down from his position as a farmer and a chieftain. In his saga, his aging is described in the following way:³¹

Egill Skalla-Grímsson varð maðr gamall, en í elli hans gerðisk hann þungfærr; ok glapnaði honum bæði heyrn og sýn; hann gerðisk ok fótstíðr. Egill var þá at Mosfelli með Grími og Þórdísi. Þat var einn dag, er Egill gekk úti með vegg og drap fæti ok fell; konur nokkurar sá þat ok hlógu at ok mæltu: 'Farinn ertu nú, Egill, með öllu, er þú fellr einn saman.' [...] Egill varð með öllu sjónlaus. Þat var einnhvern dag, er veðr var kalt um vetrinn, at Egill fór til elds at verma sik; matseljan ræddi um, at þat var undr mikit, slíkr maðr sem Egill hafði verit, at hann skyldi liggja fyrir fótum þeim, svá at þær mætti eigi vinna verk sín. 'Ver þú vel við,' segir Egill, 'þótt ek þókumk við eldinn, ok mýkjumsk vér við um rúmin.' 'Statt þú upp,' segir hon, 'og gakk til rúms þíns ok lát oss vinna verk vár.' [...] Þat var enn eitt sinn, er Egill gekk til elds at verma sik, þá spurði maðr hann, hvárt honum væri kalt á fótum, ok bað hann eigi rétta of nær eldinum. 'Svá skal vera,' segir Egill, 'en eigi verðr mér nú hógstýrt fótunum, er ek sé eigi, og er ofdaufligt sjónleysit.

This narrative is in many ways representative of the attitude towards old people in Iceland in the period in focus. In the sources dealing with the period to around 1300, almost everything concerning 'old' age is considered in unfavourable terms. 'Old' people were stiff, weak, ugly,

³⁰ *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons*, ed. by T. Nelson (Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002).

³¹ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 294–96. 'Egill Skalla-Grímsson lived a long life, but in his old age he grew very frail and both his hearing and sight failed. He also suffered from very stiff legs. Egill was living at Mosfell with Grímr and Þórdís then. One day Egill was walking outdoors alongside the wall when he stumbled and fell. Some women saw this, laughed at him and said, 'You are completely finished, Egill, now that you fall over of your own accord.' ... Egill went completely blind. One winter day when the weather was cold, he went to warm himself by the fire. The cook said it was astonishing for a man who had been as great as Egill to lie around under people's feet and stop them going about their work. 'Don't grudge me that I warm myself through by the fire,' said Egill. 'We should make room for each other.' 'Stand up,' she said, 'and go off' to your bed and leave us to get on with our work.' [...] Another time Egill went over to the fire to keep warm, and someone asked him if his legs were cold and told him not to stretch them out too close to the fire. 'I shall do that,' said Egill, 'but I don't find it easy to control my legs now that I cannot see. Being blind and dismal.'

cowards, unable to take revenge, toothless, and senile. This negative attitude towards the elderly can also be seen in that many of the grotesque episodes in the sagas involve old people.³² ‘Old’ people lost not only health, but respect.

That this negative attitude towards the ‘old’ was commonplace is clearly seen in a description of the kindness exhibited by the priest Guðmundr Arason: he was gentle to both children and old people.³³ In the Icelandic Free State society it was impossible to be a better person than he was, so much so that he later became a saint, known as Guðmundr *góði*, Guðmundr the kind.

It is only in some religious literature³⁴ and in *Hávamál* that I have discovered any positive remarks about old age. In stanza 134 we read:

Ráðomk þér, Loddfáfnir,
en þú ráð nemir,
njóta mundo ef þú nemr,
þér muno góð ef þú getr;
at három þul/hlæðu aldregi;
opt er gott þat er gamlir kveða;
opt úr skörpum belg
skilin orð koma,
þeim er hangir með hám
ok skollir með skrá
ok váfir með vilmögum.³⁵

When discussing the wisdom or aphorisms of the elderly, we have to separate between common knowledge, i.e. agriculture, geography, and place names; and what can be labelled as learned or exclusive insight, that is, knowledge attained by the so-called *fróðir* or *spakir* men and women, e.g. Ari, Sæmundr and Þuríðr.³⁶ This type of knowledge pertained not just to genealogy, famous Icelanders, kings, mythology, but

³² Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Börn og gamalmenni á þjóðveldisöld’. Cf. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World*.

³³ He was kind to ‘börn ok gamalmenne, ok alla þá er hans þurftu, ok varþ hann af því ástsæll af guði ok góðum mönnum.’ *Biskupa sögur I*, ed. by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Sigurðsson, København, 1858–1878, p. 438.

³⁴ *Homiljubók*, pp. 103, 192, 274; *Biskupa sögur II*, p. 51.

³⁵ *Eddadigte I*: ‘I counsel thee, Stray-Singer, accept my counsels,/they will be thy boon if thou obey’st them,/they will work thy weal if thou win’st them:/hold never in scorn the hoary singer;/oft the counsel of the old is good;/come words of wisdom from the withered lips/of him left to hang among hides,/to rock with the rennets/and swing with the skins’.

³⁶ *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), p. 9.

also learned Christian culture and thinking. People possessing this type of knowledge were esteemed highly: most of them were householders as well as priests, not 'old' individuals. It has been pointed out that old men and women were often said to be sorcerers and witches,³⁷ but these were not necessarily 'old'. In reality, the sources tell us only a little about 'old' people: and why should they? Their interests are definitely not assumed to be relevant to the intended audience.

It is a common argument that old people were integral to the process of bringing up children. Lying behind this assumption is the notion of a three-generation family, but as Joel Rosenthal has pointed out in his book *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, only about one-third of the families found in his study extended into three generations.³⁸ I would argue that in Iceland, three-generation families were even fewer than in Rosenthal's samples. In Iceland, the number of so-called *einvirki*-households was high; an *einvirki* was a householder that had such a small farm that he was considered its sole workforce.³⁹ However, my main argument for fewer three-generation families in Iceland than in England is supported by the census of 1703 which reported that *c.* only 12% of households were three-generational.⁴⁰ I would also argue that individuals who were unable to work did not look after children either; for when the sagas mention the upbringing of children, they typically underline that the individuals that got this task were in the prime of life.

In her book *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain'*, Shulamith Shahar claims that 'One function which old men [over 60] of all social strata performed in their position as old men was giving evidence on past customs and events', therefore they were frequently used as witnesses.⁴¹ This may have been the case in Europe, but not in Iceland. Very few disputes were settled at courts, almost all were settled through arbitration, and 'old' persons never sat on the court of arbitration. In a 'typical' conflict, a householder went to his chieftain to request support. The chieftain took over the case, and in order to put pressure on the opponent he prepared it for consideration

³⁷ Miller, 'Beating up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities'; Overing, 'A Body in Question', p. 213.

³⁸ Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*; see also Philadelphia Ricketts, this volume.

³⁹ Miller, 'Beating Up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities'.

⁴⁰ Overing, 'A Body in Question', p. 216.

⁴¹ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages. 'Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain'*, trans. by Yael Lotan (London, 1997), p. 82.

by a court. At this stage, mediation usually started with farmers acting as go-betweens. They tried to persuade the parties to let the case go to arbitration, or to hold a meeting of reconciliation where they themselves could come to an agreement. In order to preserve the peace until the meeting or the declaration of an arbitration decision, the parties agreed to a truce. The arbitrators, who were usually chieftains, represented their respective party and received the parties' handshake confirming that they would accept their decision. After the decision, both parties swore an oath of assurance that the case was now at an end. It was mostly chieftains, more rarely clerics or farmers, who were chosen to give arbitration judgements.⁴² Realistically, there were few functional roles for 'old' people to participate in medieval Icelandic society.

It comes as no surprise then to discover that people were anxious about aging, and that long life was not preferable unless one had good health. In *Hávamál*, stanza 16, we are cautioned that death is unavoidable, and only the foolish man believes he can live for ever if he avoids dangerous events.

Ósnajllr maður
hyggz muno ey lifa,
ef hann við víg varaz;
en elli gefr
hánom engi frið,
þótt hánom geirar gefi.⁴³

The term ageism covers perfectly the situation in Iceland in the period c. 900–1300. The respect for the 'old' was almost nonexistent, and attitudes towards them were negative. Then one might ask, how did medieval Icelandic society deal with individuals who became 'old'?

Taking Care of the 'Old'

According to the first paragraph in the Dependents section in *Grágás* every man (*maðr*) had to

sína omaga [...] fram at föra alande her. Moðor sína amaðr fyrst fram at föra. Enn ef hann orcar betr þa skal hann föra fram föðor sinn. Nu má hann betr. þa skal hann born sín fram föra. Nv ma hann betr þa skal

⁴² Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*.

⁴³ *Eddadigte I*: 'A coward believes he will ever live/if he keep him safe from strife:/but old age leaves him not long in peace/though spears may spare his life'.

hann systkin sin föra fram. Nv ma hann betr þa scal hann föra fram þa menn er hann a arf at taca eptir. oc þa menn er hann hefir arftake tecna.⁴⁴

This paragraph stresses the fact that each family had the responsibility for looking after its own members. However, if we look at the family structure in Iceland, we see that more than likely this was not the case. The Icelandic kinship system was bilateral: each individual was related to a number of other individuals at a certain distance from himself. Each individual's parents are related to his own group of people, the person himself is related to a third group and his children to a fourth group. These groups overlap with each other and form a cohesive network of kinship groups. Only siblings of the same parents are members of the same group.⁴⁵ Because of these overlapping family-ties, it was necessary to strengthen them with friendship: they were *frændr ok vinir* (related and friends) is a common phrase in the sagas. It was through friendship that kinship ties were held together.⁴⁶

Portentously, the weakness of kinship is further indicated by the fact that the word *frændi* (the most common word in the sagas to describe family-ties) was sometimes used to describe the relationship between an individual and persons that were not related by blood, such as a foster-father or a foster-brother. We must also bear in mind that geographical mobility was high, which encouraged farmers to cooperate with their neighbours since their actual relatives might well live in an entirely different part of the country. Family names were seldom used in the sagas, the household name took precedence over the family name; a person would almost in all cases be identified with the farm where he or she lived or worked on. In everyday life the household and thereafter the communes (s. *hreppr*) were more important than family ties.

The law codes also claim that every member of the society should be attached to one household. Everyone that was not a part of a household

⁴⁴ *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 1b, p. 3: 'maintain his own dependants. A man must first maintain his mother. And if he can manage more, then he is to maintain his father. If he can do better, then he is to maintain his children. If he can do better, then he is to maintain his brothers and sisters. If he can do better, then he is to maintain those people from whom he has the right to inherit and those he has taken on by inheritance-trade'. *Laws of Early Iceland. Grágás 2*, ed. by Andrew Dennis et al., University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies, 3, *Laws of Early Iceland 2* (Winnipeg, 2000), p. 29.

⁴⁵ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga og samfund* (København, 1977); David Gaunt, *Familjeliv i Norden* (Malmö, 1983).

⁴⁶ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Forholdet mellom frender'.

could be punished with a fine, be enslaved, or outlawed.⁴⁷ The household was under the protection of the farmer, the so-called *gríð* (grid). *Gríð* indicates that a housewoman (*gríðkona*) and a houseman (*gríðmaðr*), persons without their own household, were subordinated to a free farmer who should protect and defend them as if they were members of his own family. The housewoman and a houseman should in return for this protection carry out the work they were assigned. This led to unity inside the household. *Gríð* should insure the individuals' peace and safety while at the same time provide social control over them.⁴⁸

There was a strong loyalty between the household members; introducing a new member into a household changed the ties of loyalty. *Sturlu saga* narrated that Óláfr Þorgeirsson had been a houseman with the chieftain Hvamm-Sturla. After changing household he was sent to spy on Hvamm-Sturla, where his mother, brother and sister were household members. The saga tells that the same evening Óláfr left Hvammur, Sturla remarked: '*Ekki þótti mér Óláfr, fóstri vár, alhugligr, ok veit ek eigi, hvað verit mun hafa undir förum hans.*'⁴⁹ That the saga uses the term 'foster son' to describe the relationship between Hvamm-Sturla and his earlier houseman Óláfr demonstrates the close connection between them. Nonetheless, Óláfr as a member of a new household had to spy on his foster father.

It is likely that the wealthier household looked after their own members when they became 'old', whether it was a householder, householders wife, a housewoman or a houseman. Few, like Egill, moved to other relatives, in his situation to his foster-daughter. In some cases, farmers without children asked relatives to take over and run their farms, and then lived on with their family until death.⁵⁰ Many of the church records (*máldagar*) from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries contain regulations stating that they should maintain one or two paupers, 'old' or poor women particularly. The chieftains controlled most of the richest churches in Iceland and they were often feeding more paupers than the church records stipulated. Only nine monasteries were founded in Iceland the period before c. 1300, all of them small, so only a few

⁴⁷ *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, 18, pp. 302–05.

⁴⁸ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Forholdet mellom frender, hushold og venner på Island i fristatstiden', *Historisk tidsskrift*, 74 (1995), 311–30.

⁴⁹ *Sturlunga saga*, 1a, pp. 86, 89: 'I don't think our "foster son" Óláfr is much to be trusted and I don't know what the purpose of his journey may have been.'

⁵⁰ Miller, 'Beating up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities'; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Börn og gamalmenni á þjóðveldisöld'.

chieftains and wealthy farmers could seek refuge in them when they became 'old'.⁵¹ Other 'old' people had to rely on the communes.

There is some uncertainty about when the system of communes was established, but it is possible they were founded in the first decades after the settlement of Iceland began. There is a general agreement that the organisation of communes had reached an advanced stage of development by 1096–97, when tithes were introduced. The communes then received the right to disburse the tithe revenue intended for the poor. In other European countries the Church itself distributed this part of tithes.⁵²

The communes were independent geographical units led by five commune leaders (*sóknarmenn*), elected for one year at a time. It was one of the main duties of the communes to take care of the poor and elderly, usually the same group. The leaders of the communes had to distribute the tithes and food to the poor, as well as organise their movements around the commune. Every farmer paying assembly attendance dues (*þingfararkaup*) had to provide hospitality for the poor for a certain period of time, the duration of which was related to his wealth.

The communes' other main task was to arrange mutual insurance between the farmers. They should jointly pay half the compensation needed for two types of loss: if a farmer lost more than a quarter of his cattle and horses, or if parts of his farm, dwelling, outhouse for washing and baking, or food store burned down. The communes probably also saw to the rounding up of sheep in the autumn and the construction of roads and bridges.⁵³ We do not know how many communes there were in Iceland around 1300, but in the early eighteenth century they were c. 160, and there is much to indicate that the number had remained constant since the High Middle Ages.⁵⁴

The introduction of the Norwegian lawcodes *Járnstíða* in 1271 and *Jónsbók* 1281 did not alter the position of the communes to any great extent. There were still to be five commune leaders, and the limitation to a one-year term of office of this post as stipulated in *Grágás* was abolished, which meant that there was now no limit to the length of

⁵¹ Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Íslenskt samfélag og Rómakirkja*, ed. by Hjalti Hugason, Kristni á Íslandi, 2 (Reykjavík, 2000).

⁵² Lýður Björnsson, *Saga sveitarstjórnar á Íslandi 1* (Reykjavík, 1972); Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Eignarhald á afreittum og almenningum. Sögulegt yfirlit*, Ritsafn Sagnfræðis-
tofnunar, 4 (Reykjavík, 1981).

⁵³ Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga 1* (Reykjavík, 1972).

⁵⁴ Lýður Björnsson, *Saga sveitarstjórnar á Íslandi 1*.

a leader's office. It is unlikely that the communes were independent of the chieftains in the Free State Period. The farmers were subordinate to the chieftains, and it is highly improbable that they controlled a local institution without the chieftains being involved. According to *Grágás*, it was the leaders of the communes who gave permission for a new farmer to live in the communes. This was probably true of peripheral parts of the country, but not in the central areas. Out of self-preservation the chieftains could not allow friends of rival chieftains to be residents in neighboring farms. It was imperative that the chieftains control the heartlands and make sure that they were populated with loyal supporters whom the chieftains could muster at short notice in times of crisis. However, the communes did become independent and managed their own affairs after the introduction of the Norwegian legal system.

The sources describing the period before c. 1270 provide evidence for an apparent shift in the role of communes after this date. While the majority of the sources for the period from around 930 to 1270 hardly mention communes, they are mentioned frequently in the post-1270 documents. The most plausible cause of these changes, despite the difficulty of finding specific references to support this view, is that the elimination of the vertical ties between the chieftains and the householders strengthened the horizontal ties between householders. It is therefore likely that the five commune leaders started immediately to play a major role in the communes, and that the commune quickly took on the function as the most important social institution in the country and retained it for the rest of the Middle Ages.

Iceland was settled around c. 870, and, according to the sagas, most of the settlers (*landnámsmaðr*) came from Norway and the British Isles. The single farm was the main feature of the settlement; there were no villages or towns developed in medieval Iceland. The main emphasis after the initial settlement period was on animal husbandry and some agriculture, with fishing in rivers, lakes, and the sea, as an additional food source. Food production was low in the country. This can clearly be seen in an event that took place in the year 1120. In that year, thirty-five ships sailed from Norway to Iceland, but only eight sailed back to Norway in the autumn, causing a major crisis in some regions (*óáransauki í mörgum heruðum*),⁵⁵ and an increased pressure on the resources.

⁵⁵ *Biskupa sögur II*, p. 21.

Therefore it was important that everyone, except chieftains, wealthy farmers and their families, priests and monks, worked. A person that no longer could complete tasks expected from grown-ups or carry out adult responsibilities became 'old'. Age did not matter in the definition of the 'old' but rather the ability to work. When a person could no longer function as a productive member of society and became 'old', she or he lost status and respect, as was the case in other European societies, and was in practice socially dead: *Flest fylgir ellinni*.

OLD AGE IN VIKING-AGE BRITAIN*

Shannon Lewis-Simpson

Perhaps the most evocative image of ageing commonly associated with the Viking Age is that of the blind and nearly deaf Egill Skalla-Grímsson attempting to hobble outdoors despite his *fótstíðr* ('stiff-leggedness'), suffering the indignity of falling over in his *þungfer* ('infirmity'), and then being mocked for it.¹ Here, the infirmity of Egill's body is despicable, his weakness is ridiculed by women. No appreciation is made of his strong mind, and his continued poetic genius, nor of the many contributions he had made throughout his long life. Attitudes towards the old body are absolutely negative in this medieval Icelandic account. Did the same negative attitudes towards the old exist in Viking-Age England? What was considered 'old' in Viking-Age colonial society? And, what sort of life could the old individual expect?

To understand how old was old in Viking-Age Britain, and how the elderly were perceived and treated, one must first understand when, where and what is meant by the culture under consideration. Viking-Age Britain is a term of convenience used to describe the heterogeneous culture of ninth- to eleventh-century Britain, exhibiting an admixture of influences from Scandinavia and the indigenous Scottish and Anglo-Saxon cultures. Generally, any cultural product found in those areas of Britain thought to have been most heavily settled by Scandinavians (eastern and northern England, Scotland, Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides) which exhibits a certain Scandinavian influence, style, linguistic similarity or 'character' is attributed to the 'Viking-Age', and this is the position taken here.² This position is not infallible, however,

* I would like to thank Matthew Townend, Julian Richards and the two anonymous readers for their helpful comments.

¹ *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), pp. 294–96; see also Yershova, Jon Viðar Sigurðsson, this volume. All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

² For general sources on England and Scotland, see, F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1971); Cyril Hart, *The Danelaw* (London, 1992); *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney, and the North Atlantic*, ed. by Colleen Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher Morris (Edinburgh, 1993); B.J.N. Edwards, *Vikings in North West England: the Artefacts* (Lancaster, 1998); James Graham-Campbell and Colleen Batey, *The Vikings in Scotland: an Archaeological*

since one cannot assume cultural homogeneity. But if the communities in which Scandinavian settlers integrated and the cultures from whence they came are taken as potentially heterogeneous, how, then, can one hope to identify distinct colonial cultures, and changing attitudes towards youth and age, in the cultural record? There remains no satisfactory answer to this problem, but it is important to be aware of the difficulty.

It has to be said at the onset that, other than the obvious data which one can glean from the material remains of interments, the old are not well represented in the cultural products of Viking-Age Britain. To more precisely define what 'old' meant to this heterogeneous cultural milieu, and how the elderly were regarded, it is worthwhile to take a catholic approach to the evidence specific from the time and place, and an interdisciplinary approach may be deemed to be appropriate. The practitioners of the different disciplines of archaeology, history, onomastics and literary studies exist in a symbiotic relationship which is not always easy, due in part to the methodological and theoretical difficulties of dealing with interdisciplinary evidence. But, as mentioned in the introduction, the collective study of both material and literary forms of evidence can better consider all factors of age in the determination of what age meant to a particular culture. Osseous remains provide evidence of chronological and biological age, and functional/social age can be inferred from the physiology of the body and the burial rite itself, particularly with how the old were treated in burial. Old Norse personal names and skaldic verse from Viking-Age Britain also occasionally refer to the old, and one can glean attitudes towards chronological, biological/sexual, social and functional ageing from these contemporary cultural products.

Who is Old? Chronology and Physiology

As noted in the introduction to this volume, there are different types of 'old'. One can be biologically old, meaning that the body is decrepit,

Survey (Edinburgh, 1998); Dawn Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw: its Social Structure* (London, 2000); *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. by Dawn Hadley and Julian Richards (Turnhout, 2000); *Vikings and the Danelaw: Proceedings from the 13th Viking Congress*, ed. by J. Graham-Campbell et al. (Woodbridge, 2001); *Land, Sea and Home: Proceedings of a Conference on Viking-Period Settlement, at Cardiff July 2001*, ed. by John Hines, Alan Lane and Mark Redknapp (Leeds, 2004).

cannot function as it could in prime of life, and the individual suffers because of this, as in the case of Egill's old age. One can also be chronologically old, and this is the chief modern criterion for judging whether one is aged or not.

Skeletal data sets are the best hope to define what was considered biologically old for proto-historical cultures such as Viking-Age Britain. Although the presence of grave goods and method of interment—cremation, flexed inhumation, boat grave, etc.—have been used as indicators of pre-Christian Viking-Age burials, in the syncretic society of Viking-Age Britain, one must allow for change in burial customs, and unaccompanied burials in the proximity of Viking-Age settlements should perhaps be included in palaeodemographic studies. But, even if one takes into account all burials contemporary with a known Viking-Age settlement or cemetery, the evidence is not extensive, and in earlier excavations the focus is on the finds rather than osseous remains.³ To give but one example, no full osteological study of the few reliably dated Anglian and Viking-Age burials of York has yet been undertaken. The rescue excavations at York Minster between 1969 and 1973 revealed a pre-Conquest cemetery but, due to the urgency of engineering work

³ For discussion of paleodemographics, see, e.g., A. Boddington, 'From Bones to Population: the Problem of Numbers', in *Death, Decay and Reconstruction: Approaches to Archaeology and Forensic Science*, ed. by A. Boddington et al. (Manchester, 1987), pp. 180–97; Niels Lynnerup, *The Greenland Norse: a Biological-Anthropological Study*, Meddelelser om Grønland, Man and Society, 24 (Copenhagen, 1998), pp. 39–44. For Viking-Age osteological evidence from Britain, see, e.g., Christopher D. Morris, *The Birsay Bay Project. Volume 1. Brough Road Excavations 1976–1982* (Durham, 1989); Margaret Bruce in A.J. Dunwell et al., 'A Viking Age Cemetery at Cnip, Uig, Isle of Lewis', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 125 (1995), 719–752, fische 4: B9–G14 (pp. 739–42, fische 4: B9–G14); Daphne Home Lorimer, 'The Bodies', in Olwyn Owen and Magnar Dalland, *Scar: a Viking Boat Burial on Sanday, Orkney* (Phantassie, 1999), pp. 52–59; Berit Sellevold, *Picts and Vikings at Westness: Anthropological Investigations of the Skeletal Material from the Cemetery at Westness, Rousay, Orkney Islands*, NIKU Scientific Report, 10 (Oslo, 1999); Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle, 'Repton and the Great "Heathen Army" 873–4', in *Vikings and the Danelaw*, pp. 45–96; David Freke, *Excavations on St Patrick's Isle, Peel, Isle of Man, 1982–88, Prehistoric, Viking, Medieval and Later* (Liverpool, 2002); P.J. Ashmore, 'Orkney Burials in the First Millennium AD', in *Sea Change: Orkney and Northern Europe in the Later Iron Age*, ed. by J. Downes and A. Richie (Balgavies, Angus, 2003), pp. 35–50; Anne Brundell et al., 'Buckquoy Revisited' in *Sea Change*, pp. 95–104 (pp. 100–03); Joy Langston in Greg Speed and Penelope Walton Rogers, 'A Burial of a Viking Woman at Adwick-le-Street, South Yorkshire', *Medieval Archaeology*, 48 (2004), 51–90 (pp. 60–61). The skeletal material from Viking-Age York is largely unpublished, but see A.D. Phillips, 'The pre-Norman Cemetery (Phase 6Ai)', in Derek Phillips and Brenda Haywood, *Excavations at York Minster*, ed. by M.O.H. Carver, 2 vols (London, 1995), I, pp. 75–92 and F. Lee, 'Palaeopathological Report on Selected Skeletons from the pre-Norman Cemetery', *Excavations at York Minster*, pp. 559–73.

to underpin the Minster, all partial or incomplete skeletons which had already been disturbed by workmen were not recorded in their entirety.⁴

One can tentatively say that some of these burials from York Minster were from a mixed colonial milieu as they were recovered underneath or adjacent to grave covers and headstones depicting Scandinavian mythological scenes.⁵ Of the five burials found underneath idiosyncratic stone sculpture, only two were fully recorded: one of a child, and one of an adult male who suffered osteoarthritis, and exhibited degenerative changes to the left and right auricular surface.⁶ Of three other contemporary burials found near this tenth-century grave cover depicting Sigurðr and Fafnir, one was a child of 6–9 years, one was female, aged between 30–40 with sacralisation of the sacrum and periodontal disease, and one was a ‘mature’ male with a well-healed blade injury, degeneration of the vertebrae and knees, osteothrosis, ‘widespread osteoarthritis affecting the left and right shoulder and elbow joints, the left wrist and left and right hip joints’, ‘infection of maxillary sinus’, ‘osteoarthrotic change of the glenoid cavity or shoulder joint [with] the right joint destroyed and the bone eburnated, [and] the left has only a small localized area of eburnation’.⁷

With such a small data set it is impossible to make any kind of statement about life expectancy in Viking-Age York, and there are not many palaeodemographic studies from elsewhere in Viking-Age Britain with a large enough data set to be of any statistical use. For the sake of comparison, a tenth- to twelfth-century Anglo-Saxon cemetery was excavated at Raunds Furnells in Northamptonshire. Of 363 burials within this cemetery, there was a 20% infant mortality, and 71% of all females died within the childbearing age of 17–35.⁸ At the cemetery of Westness, Rousay, Orkney, 32 skeletons from the Pictish period and Viking Age were examined of which 8 were interred with typical

⁴ A.D. Phillips, ‘The pre-Norman Cemetery (Phase 6Ai)’, p. 75.

⁵ For discussions of Viking-Age stone sculpture including that found at York Minster, see *Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age Sculpture*, ed. by James T. Lang, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, 49 (Oxford, 1978); *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon and Stone Sculpture, III: York and Eastern Yorkshire*, ed. by James T. Lang (Oxford, 1991).

⁶ M.O.H. Carver and Brenda Haywood, ‘Assemblage Summary’, in *Excavations at York Minster*, I, pp. 574–617 (p. 581); York Minster Archive Box 10.

⁷ Grave 17 in F. Lee, ‘Palaeopathological Report’, pp. 564, 569–70.

⁸ Faye Powell in *Raunds Furnells: the Anglo-Saxon Church and Churchyard*, ed. by A. Bodington with Graham Cadman (London, 1996), pp. 29, 114.

Table 1. Conventional anthropological age cohorts

Cohort	Chronological age in years
<i>Infans</i> I	0–6
<i>Infans</i> II	6–12/14
<i>Juvenilis</i>	12/14–18/21
<i>Adultus</i>	18/21–35
<i>Maturus</i>	>35
<i>Senilis</i>	>60

Viking-Age grave goods. Here, the average age at death was 41 for males, and 45 for females, but four females were in the 50–70 cohort, and one female was aged between 60–80 years at death.⁹ In these two cemeteries, it is worth noting that if a female survived infancy, childhood and childbirth, she stood a better chance of making old bones than her male counterparts who tended to die within the 35–50 year cohort. This lack of statistically representative skeletal data is a widespread problem: in her discussions of Iron-Age Denmark, Berit Sellevold points out that sex and age distributions of skeletal material ‘are clearly not representative of the “living populations” of the various time periods or geographical areas under investigation’ and studies based upon these data sets ‘leave many questions unanswered’.¹⁰

Aside from the paucity of regionally specific data, and of more pressing concern to a study of age, there are methodological problems in the extrapolation of chronological ages at death from skeletal remains. Most osteological reports tend to age a skeleton by cohort, giving a range of years rather than a specific age.

There is good reason for this, as it is very difficult to assign a more specific age to an adult skeleton. In his study of the medieval Greenland Norse population, Niels Lynnerup groups the older cohorts together since ‘the distinction between *maturus* and *senilis* can be particularly difficult, mainly relying as it does on the appearance of degenerative

⁹ Sellevold, *Picts and Vikings at Westness*; Olwyn Owen, ‘The Scar Boat Burial—the Missing Decades of the Early Viking Age in Orkney and Shetland’, in *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350: Contact, Conflict and Coexistence*, ed. by J. Adams and K. Holman (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 3–33 (p. 19).

¹⁰ Berit Sellevold, ‘Comments on Population Studies and the Archaeologist’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 22/2 (1989), 77–87 (pp. 80–81). Any extrapolation or ‘estimation’ of mortality or life expectancy demanded by palaeodemographers and social scientists is, at best, only a guess in relation to the population as a whole and may be potentially misleading if one bases a study on individual mortality.

changes'.¹¹ A burial of a female with two oval brooches recovered near Doncaster, South Yorkshire, for example, was aged to over 45 years due to 'degenerative changes visible in the spine' and 'joint problems in the upper neck'.¹² But it should be noted that degenerative joint disease (DJD), although 'strongly related to age', does develop from other factors such as trauma and obesity.¹³

In archaeological reports, one will note the ages of many skeletons reported as 'over 50', with 50 generally considered 'old' by most osteologists. At Peel Castle on the Isle of Man, for example, the mean age spread of graves which could be attributed to a tenth-/eleventh-century colonial milieu was 20–45 for females and 30–50 for males.¹⁴ This is clearly not as accurate as one would like to precisely define 'old age'. Aside from examining skeletal pathology for age-related diseases such as osteoporosis, arthritis, and periodontal disease, adult skeletons are routinely aged through dental wear. Simon Mays notes that after age 50 it is impossible to more accurately age a skeleton by dental attrition,¹⁵ but he has since further specified that mandibular molar wear is 'a reliable ageing technique for most archaeological skeletal material'.¹⁶

Aside from any problems of accurate ageing of the over-50 cohort, analysis of the Christ Church Spitalfields excavations in London has challenged the overall usefulness of chronological age assignment. From Spitalfields, the skeletons of 387 individuals buried from 1700–1850 were examined using modern osteoarchaeological methods.¹⁷ The years of birth and death were on record for these individuals, but 'categorising adults into crude groups such as young (below 35), middle-aged (35–50) or old failed to classify individuals into the correct group. Only 39% were correctly attributed, with 2% overaged, and 58% underaged'.¹⁸

¹¹ Lynnerup, *The Greenland Norse*, p. 39.

¹² Joy Langston in Speed and Rogers, 'A Burial of a Viking Woman', pp. 60–61.

¹³ Linda G. Lynch, 'Appendix 2: Human Skeletal Remains', in *Underworld: Death and Burial in Cloghermore Cave, Co. Kerry*, ed. by Michael Connolly and Frank Coyne (Dublin, 2005), pp. 231–88.

¹⁴ Stanley Rubin in *Excavations on St Patrick's Isles, Peel, Isle of Man, 1982–88, Prehistoric, Viking, Medieval and Later* (Liverpool, 2002), Period 3–4: Area L, late 10th– post 10th; Period 2b: Viking-Age graves; 2c: conversion cemetery.

¹⁵ Simon Mays, *The Archaeology of Human Bones* (London, 1998).

¹⁶ Simon Mays, 'The Relationship Between Molar Wear and Age in an Early 19th Century AD Archaeological Human Skeletal Series of Documented Age at Death', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 29 (2002), 861–71 (p. 861).

¹⁷ Margaret Cox, *Life and Death in Spitalfields 1700 to 1850* (York, 1996).

¹⁸ Cox, *Life and Death*, p. 93.

Simon Mays notes that 'those over about 70 years of age tended to be under-aged, those under 70 tended to be over-aged'.¹⁹ Thus, one can be chronologically old but physically and biologically young, or vice versa. Chronological age may, as Gillian Overing has suggested, have been of less significance than biological age or decrepitude.²⁰ Indeed, this would tie in with Carol Clover's and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson's arguments that, in medieval Iceland, one must be socially useful: when one ceases to be useful, one becomes a dependant, *úmætr*, with associated negative connotations.²¹ 'Function is paramount.'²²

I do not think one should believe that if a skeleton is chronologically aged to 50 or 60 years that the individual must have been elderly and, by implication, infirm. Rather than estimating chronological age in archaeological reports, perhaps it would be more useful to focus on skeletal pathology to estimate what the individual's physical limitations were at death detailing biological/functional age: were they fully functioning in prime of life, or decrepit and infirm?

As an example of the differences in capabilities of individuals of a certain age, one might consider two burials from the Pictish/Viking-Age cemetery at Westness, Rousay, Orkney.²³ Both are accompanied boat graves, suggesting pre-Christian Viking-Age interments. Both the interred are males: one aged at 45–55 years and the other at 50–60 years. The 'younger man' exhibited a fusion of the cervical vertebra to the skull, which would impede movement of the head and neck, and osteoarthritis in the remainder of the spine. His first left rib was deformed. He also had extremely bad teeth.²⁴ The 'older man', by an estimated five to ten years, had a deformed right hand as a result of an earlier healed injury, osteoarthritis in his right hip, and bad teeth. But, arthritis probably did not send him to Valhalla as the excavators found four arrow points about the skeleton.²⁵ Even though the older man was assigned an older chronological age, in all likelihood he was

¹⁹ Simon Mays, *The Archaeology of Human Bones*; Boddington, 'From Bones to Population', pp. 188–92.

²⁰ Gillian Overing, 'A Body in Question: Aging, Community, and Gender in Medieval Iceland', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 29/2 (1999), 211–25.

²¹ Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum* (1993), 363–87; see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, this volume.

²² Overing, 'A Body in Question', p. 212.

²³ Sellevold, *Picts and Vikings at Westness*.

²⁴ Sellevold, *Picts and Vikings*, pp. 32–33.

²⁵ Sellevold, *Picts and Vikings*, pp. 43–44.

functionally and biologically younger and thus considered neither 'old' nor 'useless' by his community. Being fixated on years lived as a means of determining old age is perhaps not the most fruitful means of thinking about the elderly, in the past or in the present.

Having said this, what is the way forward? How should the chronological ages and palaeodemographic statistics provided in reports be viewed, returning to the question of how old was old in Viking-Age Britain? I have argued that chronological age is irrelevant in itself: it is of more relevance to consider the physical state of the body in death along with the approximate age range to determine whether any individual of the *maturus/senilis* cohorts can be considered biologically and, more importantly, socially and functionally old. Relative infirmity should perhaps be considered a better indicator of 'old' than chronological age, but of course such infirmity is difficult to prove conclusively. Thus, biology and physiology can supersede chronology in defining who is aged from burial evidence.

Caring for (and Disposing of?) the Old in Death

Archaeological remains can assist one in deciding who is old, through an investigation of skeletal pathology, but also how the old were subsequently cared for in death, and whether the old were treated differently than any other age group in mortuary practice. The construction of the grave is a social act, imbued with meaning. Burials should provide important evidence of social attitudes if those in Viking-Age Britain created a specific identity for the aged in death.

The subset of interred individuals who are infirm and of some advanced age, and who thus might be considered biologically and socially old, is small, but nevertheless it is worth examining a few interesting examples. Excavations at the Brough of Birsay, Orkney recovered the skeleton of a male who was 'probably in his early 60s'.²⁶ He was buried with an antler comb of mid-ninth- to mid-tenth-century type and an iron knife. The remains were completely disarticulated, suggesting some time had passed before he was interred or that he was

²⁶ Morris, *The Birsay Bay Project*, pp. 273–74.

moved after death.²⁷ He suffered dental abscesses, periodontal disease, and osteoarthritis of the spine and shoulders. There is no doubt that this individual would have been infirm or hindered physically when he died. Another skeleton recovered at Birsay was ‘probably a female, of middle age, who suffered from fairly severe arthritis of the spine and left elbow’ with ‘advanced attrition and periodontal disease in mandible’ and with the pulps of five teeth exposed at death.²⁸ This led osteologists to age her to between 50–55 years. She was buried with an iron knife, and her skeleton is radiocarbon dated to *c.* 720–1020.²⁹ Both of these over-50-year-olds would have had problems eating, walking, and doing any strenuous tasks. They would not have had a comfortable later life. It is of note that the female suffered a fracture to the base of her skull which was the probable cause of her death.

These burials were relatively poorly furnished, suggesting a lack of social status within the community. The elderly male and another male interred nearby aged at *c.* 30 years were both disarticulated, suggesting their bodies were disturbed post mortem. The female met her end suspiciously. Moreover, these burials were deposited in a developing midden or rubbish heap at the site. Concerning this apparent callous disregard for the dead, the excavator Christopher Morris suggests that ‘sentiment for the *physical* remains of their relatives and forebears had little place in the Scandinavian outlook on life’.³⁰

²⁷ Morris, *The Birsay Bay Project*, BY 78 CU Area 1; Skeleton 1; Norse Pd; ‘The Birsay Bay Project: a Résumé’, in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic, Select Papers from the Proceedings of the XIth Viking Congress*, ed. by C.E. Batey et al. (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 285–307 (p. 301).

²⁸ Morris, *The Birsay Bay Project*, BY 78 BJ; Area 2; Skeleton 1.

²⁹ Ashmore, ‘Orkney Burials in the First Millennium AD’, p. 49; Morris, ‘Birsay Bay’, p. 301.

³⁰ Morris, ‘Birsay Bay’, p. 301; my emphasis. This disregard may find a parallel in a recent study of Cloughermore Cave in Co. Kerry, Ireland, the excavations of which have revealed some bizarre depositions of Viking-Age and earlier remains, including the post-deposition retrieval of a tenth-century partially decomposed skull and neck of a male aged 35–39 years, the flesh and tendons being ripped rather than cut. The osteologist also notes that the articulated right foot bones of the male were recovered in a prone position next to the left knee, which must have been done post-deposition: Lynch, ‘Appendix 2: Human Skeletal Remains’, pp. 263, 283–85. This burial was relatively well-equipped, with two copper-alloy pins, perhaps to hold a shroud, a knife, a red jasper pebble, and an iron shield boss: Connolly and Coyne, *Underworld: Death and Burial in Cloughermore Cave*, p. 60. The excavators state this may be a result of ‘deliberate desecration’ of the burial by a native Irish population, as many of the skeletal remains indicate ‘peri-mortem breaks’, the severity of which indicating these occurred ‘when the bones were defleshed or partially defleshed’: pp. 54–55. But, another possibility lies in that the male’s skull may have been taken for reburial elsewhere, and not desecrated

It is worth considering the possibility that these individuals were *ómagar* ('dependants') or *grafgangs menn* ('pauper freedmen'), who could be exposed or killed during time of famine or hardship as described in the Norwegian Gulapingslög dating from the twelfth century:

Nu fær leysingi leysingiu. oc er gort frælsis ol beggia þeirra. þa genga born beggia arve. En er þau verða at þrotom. þa ero þat grafgangs menn. Scal grava grof i kirkiugarðe. oc setia þau þar i. oc lata þar deyia. take skapdrotten þat ór er lengst livir oc fode þat síðan.³¹

If one takes into account the method and positioning of the Birsay interments and the means of death of the female, along with the testimony of the (later) Gulapingslög, might one propose that these three individuals at Birsay were slaves who died or, particularly in the case of the female, had outlived their usefulness? George Minois has made the point that there was no such thing as a comfortable retirement for the poor who, by necessity, needed to work to live, and were thus socially 'relegated to the ranks of the beggars, madmen, old men and cripples of all kinds. Once included among the mass of the poor, the old man cannot be distinguished from his companions in misfortune. He belongs to the more general history of poverty'.³² However repugnant this is to our modern sensibilities, the apparent callousness towards the indigent elderly should not be discounted as a method of 'poor relief' in the

by another group, although the desecration present throughout the cave graveyard suggests intervention by others is more likely.

³¹ *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. by R. Keyser and P.A. Munch et al., 5 vols (Christiania, 1846–95), 'Um kvanfang leysingia', p. 63. 'If a freedman marries a freedwoman, both having celebrated their freedom ales, the children shall inherit from both; but if they come to extreme want, they shall be ready for the grave: a grave shall be dug in the churchyard and they shall be placed within it and be allowed to perish. Let the master take out the one that lives longest and provide it with food from that time on': *The Earliest Norwegian Laws, Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law*, trans. by Lawrence M. Larson (New York), chapter 63, pp. 82–83. Cf. the *Ómagabálkr* laws ('On Dependants') in the Icelandic lawcode *Grágás: Grágás. Islendernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Odense, 1974), Ib, pp. 3–27. These are less harsh in their pronouncement of the treatment of dependants, and underscore the duties and responsibilities of the family in caring for the poor: for discussion, see William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 147–54.

³² George Minois, *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. by Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Oxford, 1989), p. 138. The agelessness of the poor can also be extended to the genderlessness and classlessness of the poor, as clues usually present in the grave (grave goods, for example) are not present in the poorly-furnished grave to signify gender or status. One is left with the physical skeleton of the individual, but that can only tell so much.

Viking-Age world-view. Indeed, the very need to codify laws concerning the protection of dependants in Norway and Iceland suggests that care of dependants, old and young, was not a universal given.³³

It may not have been the fact that one was old which was lamentable in Viking-Age society, but if one was old and infirm or, worse still, old, poor and infirm. One should not discount the importance of economic independence in old age: if one was rich, then old age need not be as great an impediment. A rare, triple interment in an outlier boat grave of a ten- to eleven-year-old child of undetermined sex, a male in his thirties, and a female in the *senilis* cohort was excavated in 1991 at Scar, Sanday, Orkney.³⁴ The burial has been dated to the mid-tenth century. The female and child are interred in the central position of the boat, occupying 'pride of place'. The osteologist reports the female was 'very elderly [and] possibly in her seventies' based on the osteoporotic condition of her bones.³⁵ Unlike the woman from Birsay, she did not suffer significantly from DJD, and more than likely enjoyed a good quality of life in her later years. She was also interred with one of the richest assemblages of goods found in a Viking-Age grave in Britain.³⁶ The woman, according to the excavators, 'must have been a figure of increasing awe and reverence' in her community due to her unusual longevity.³⁷ But, one must be cautious in assuming that the community would accord her special status solely because of her advanced age: her long life was not praised so much in itself, but for the fact that she was presumably able in body and mind to function within her community, and to play an active social role. And, she apparently had the resources to do so.³⁸

The Scar burial is exceptional, and therefore cannot be used as an exemplar for how the old were treated generally within Viking-Age Britain. Both Christina Lee and Lotta Mejsholm argue for a link between the very young, the disabled and the very old as being the

³³ See Lotta Mejsholm and Anna Hansen, this volume, for discussion of laws concerning delivery of a dependant child to unwilling guardians.

³⁴ Owen and Dalland, *Scar*; Olywn Owen, 'The Scar Boat Burial'.

³⁵ Daphne Home Lorimer, 'The Bodies', p. 56.

³⁶ Goods included a gilt Troms-type equal armed brooch, and a rare whalebone plaque, which may have religious significance: Owen and Dalland, *Scar*, pp. 60–102.

³⁷ Owen and Dalland, *Scar*, p. 154.

³⁸ See Overing, 'A Body in Question', pp. 217–18, for discussion of the economics of social welfare in saga tradition. See also Ricketts, this volume, for the functional and social roles of grandmothers in familial economics.

members of society in most need of care and assistance, even in the afterlife, as suggested by the position of interment and addition of grave goods in transitional cemeteries from Anglo-Saxon England and Late Viking-Age Sweden. The same sort of link cannot be made conclusively on the basis of the limited data set from Viking-Age Britain. Yet it can be said that chronological age in itself does not appear to have been an important distinguishing factor to determine how one was treated in death, for better or worse, any more than was socio-economic status. But, aside from the anomalous Scar burial and following Minois, is there a general, negative and indivisible link between 'old' and 'poor' in the Viking-Age mind? The linguistic evidence of personal name formations and skaldic verse may help to answer that question.

Naming the Old

Cecily Clark suggests that personal names reflect social attitudes, and thus one may survey the etymologies and meanings of names attested for Viking-Age Britain for further evidence of contemporary attitudes towards the old.³⁹ As is the case with unaccompanied interments, a certain ambiguity exists with personal names from Viking-Age England. Because of the similarity of basic name formations in Old Norse and Old English and the presence of cognates, it can be difficult to assign a particular name to either a Scandinavian or an Anglo-Saxon tradition. Indeed, names in themselves are not strict indicators of ethnicity, but rather signifiers of a certain ethnic affiliation, real or imagined. Some of the personal names discussed are attested in tenth-century charters, but the majority is attested in later twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources and/or place names. Thus, as with any linguistic or philological study, problems of source chronology need to be addressed. If one were to

³⁹ Cecily Clark, 'The Early Personal Names of King's Lynn: an Essay in Socio-cultural History. Part I: Baptismal Names', in *Words, Names and History: Selected Papers of Cecily Clark*, ed. by P. Jackson (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 241–57 (p. 244). Gillian Fellows-Jensen's *Scandinavian Personal Names in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire* (Copenhagen, 1968 [hereafter PNLY]) is invaluable for its regionally comprehensive study. Olof von Feilitzen's *The Pre-Conquest Personal Names of the Domesday Book* (Uppsala, 1937 [hereafter PNDB]), the collected works of Cecily Clark (*Words, Names and History*), and Björkman's list of ON names in England (*Nordische personennamen in England: in alt- und frühmittel-Englischer zeit* [Halle, 1910]) are used to cross-reference Fellows-Jensen's list. Von Feilitzen predominantly lists names only attested in 1086: Fellows-Jensen expands on the material gathered by him to also refer to pre-Conquest material and later manuscripts.

solely use sources from the Viking Age proper, this would severely restrict the body of evidence that is not so very vast. Post-Viking-Age sources contain many more names displaying Scandinavian influence, some of which have been linguistically proven to belong to an earlier period from that in which they were first attested. As David Parsons has recently reminded us, 'it does not seem likely that all of these [later] names were introduced from Scandinavia, or coined in England, in the post-Conquest period. . . . [T]his kind of richness in later centuries suggests that many more [Old Norse names] must have gone unrecorded'.⁴⁰ If younger names are derived from an earlier onomastic influence, one may deem these indicative of earlier social attitudes from a colonial milieu.

As highlighted in the challenges of precisely ageing skeletal remains, 'old' is a relative concept like 'ugly' or 'tall', and the majority of names which suggest attitudes towards old age could be considered nicknames. Diana Whaley has noted two types of nicknames distinguished in the prose sources: an individual could be given a *sannnafn* or a nickname based on the physical description of the named, as is presumably the case with the Hiberno-Norse king Óláfr *inn hvíti* ('the white'). One could otherwise be given an *aukanafn*, that is, an abusive or deprecatory name: a person need not have actually been socially or biologically old to have been called such.⁴¹ Although it is impossible to say whether these names describe reality or are merely parroting certain naming conventions, it is noteworthy that the Old Norse names in the British onomasticon denoting 'old' are either neutral or somewhat abusive in their connotations and etymologies—there are no names denoting 'old' in a purely positive light.

Some names may be considered *sannnefni* which describe the bearer of the name neutrally and do not seem to carry any slanderous connotation. The feminine name form *Langlíf* ('long life', 'long-lived') is attested in the Domesday Book in the Yorkshire town of *Langlivethorpe*, an earl's daughter is named *Langlíf* in *Orkneyinga saga*, and the name is common to eastern England.⁴² *Elli* ('old age') is attested in the Domesday

⁴⁰ David Parsons, 'Anna, Dot, Thorir... Counting Domesday Personal Names', *Nomina*, 25 (2002), 29–52 (pp. 32–33).

⁴¹ Diana Whaley, 'Nicknames and Narratives in the Sagas', *Arkiv för Nordisk filologi*, 108 (1993), 122–45.

⁴² Gillian Fellows-Jensen suggests the name was current in the ninth century: 'Some Orkney Personal Names', in C. Batey et al. (eds), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 397–407 (p. 403). The name is not attested in

Book as a feminine personal name in Yorkshire,⁴³ as is *Kerling/Kelling* ('old woman') which has been recorded as an uncommon by-name in Denmark and Sweden.⁴⁴ In her study of old age in Old Norse literary sources Gillian Overing argues that both *Ellī* and *Kerling/Kelling* carry negative connotations concerning sorcery and witchcraft, citing as evidence, for example, the fact that the old woman who brings Þor to his knees in the *Edda* is called *Ellī*.⁴⁵ But any gendered malevolence is coincident as the point made in the *Edda* is that old age affects all equally: *firir því at engi hefir sá orðit ok engi mun verða ef svá gamall er at ellī bíðr, at eigi komi ellin qllum till fallz*.⁴⁶ That a female character subdues Þor underscores how the powerful Old Age conquers all, even, to a degree, the gods. *Kerling* is the feminine equivalent of *karl* ('old man', 'poor old man').⁴⁷ To link these words and resulting by-names with sorcery applies to Viking-Age evidence inappropriate prejudices concerning the old woman that have originated from classical and patristic writings and are common to later literary depictions.⁴⁸ Indeed, it should be noted that there do not appear to exist any specific Old Norse words for menopause or the biological ageing of a woman connected with the life cycle, which is a prime focus for medieval authors in discussing the dangers of the old woman's body. The closest concept is *barn-eign vera ór* ('to be past child-bearing years'), the other is *úbyrja* ('barren'), with the modern Icelandic being *tíðahvarf* ('disappearance of the period').⁴⁹ The

Lena Peterson's corpus of runic names, and thus could be a Danelaw construction: Lena Peterson, *Nordiskt Runnamnslexikon*, 4th edn (2002), <<http://www.sofi.se>> [downloaded 2 September 2005]. The name is used as a gloss in Ælfric's grammar for the Latin *longaeuus*: *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. by J. Zupitza, Sammlung englischer Denkmäler, 1 (Berlin, 1880; repr. with intro. by Helmut Gneuss, 1966), pp. 297–322.

⁴³ PNLy, p. 77.

⁴⁴ PNLy, pp. 165–66.

⁴⁵ Overing, 'A Body in Question', p. 218 and n. 39.

⁴⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Gylfaginning, og Prosaforðellingene av Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Anne Holtmark and Jón Helgason (Oslo, 1976), p. 59: 'for no one has been and never will anyone be, if he is so aged to become old, who does not stumble because of old age'.

⁴⁷ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vígfusson, *An Icelandic—English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1874), s.v. *kerling*.

⁴⁸ For the topos of the evil, old woman, especially the evil, old, 'poor' woman, see, for instance, Claude Thomasset, 'The Nature of Woman', in *A History of Women in the West, II: Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (London, 1995), pp. 43–69 (pp. 61–62); Shulamith Shahar, 'The Old Body in Medieval Culture', in *Framing Old Bodies*, ed. by S. Kay and M. Rubin (Manchester, 1994), pp. 160–86 (pp. 163–64); Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* trans. by Yael Lotan (London, 1997), pp. 43–44, 150–52.

⁴⁹ Thorbjörg Helgadóttir, Dictionary of Old Norse Prose, pers. comm.

lack of an Old Norse term for menopause suggests that ‘deep-rooted, pan-cultural stereotypes involving fear and hatred of the old female body’ may not, *contra* Overing,⁵⁰ have existed in the Old-Norse-speaking world, and do not seem to be evident within Viking-Age Britain. Rather than focusing on the female body, *per se*, the etymology of *Kerling* would suggest a link between poverty and age, a connection that is perhaps echoed in the graves at Birsay as earlier discussed.

Masculine names which neutrally describe the old include *Feggi* (‘old man’?) which is first attested in high medieval English sources but is thought to be a Viking-Age construction.⁵¹ **Gamalbarn* (‘old + child’?) is attested in the Yorkshire Domesday and is an original Anglo-Scandinavian formation.⁵² The name *Ekill* (‘widower’) is attested in Danelaw place names.⁵³ *Forni* (‘the old one/old fashioned one’) is common to northern England and is found in Iceland from the tenth century onwards, but later in Norway.⁵⁴ *Hári* (‘white haired’) is attested as a by-name in the Domesday Book for Yorkshire,⁵⁵ and *Hæringr* (‘hoary old man’) is found in West Yorkshire with some cases in West Scandinavia.⁵⁶ *Afi* (‘grand-father’) is found in the Domesday Book under Aveland and Avetorp, Lincolnshire.⁵⁷ Likewise, *Áki*, a diminutive form of **ani* or *ái* (‘great-grandfather’), is attested widely throughout Lincolnshire and Yorkshire from Domesday Book onwards.⁵⁸ *Gamall* (‘the old one’) is quite common to the Danelaw as it is elsewhere in the Old Norse onomasticon.⁵⁹ **Gamalkarl* (‘old + *karl*’) is only attested in the Domesday Book for Yorkshire, is an original Anglo-Scandinavian

⁵⁰ Overing, ‘A Body in Question’, p. 221.

⁵¹ PNLY, p. 81.

⁵² PNLY, p. 95.

⁵³ PNLY, pp. 76–77; also a name for a sea-king in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*.

⁵⁴ PNLY, pp. 84–85; *The Place Names of Westmorland*, ed. by A.H. Smith, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1967), II, p. 166.

⁵⁵ PNLY, pp. 134–35; the OE cognate *har* is attested twelve times in the Dictionary of Old English Corpus, but not as a personal name: Online *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* [hereafter OEC] <<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/o/oec/>> [accessed 30 November 2006].

⁵⁶ PNLY, pp. 147–48.

⁵⁷ PNLY, p. 1. The name is also found on an eleventh-century Danish coin and might be attested in Sweden.

⁵⁸ PNLY, pp. 3–5. This form is frequently found in Denmark and Sweden on runic inscriptions, and much later in Norway: Peterson, *Nordiskt Runnamnslexikon*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ PNLY, 89–95; Peterson, *Nordiskt Runnamnslexikon*, p. 56. There are three references to *Gamal* as a personal name in the OEC.

formation,⁶⁰ and, like the feminine name *Kerling*, this name furthers the link between poverty and age.

Some masculine names may better be classified as *auknefni* as these are somewhat slanderous in their etymologies. One such name is **Skraggr* ('shrivelled person', or 'weak old man' in Swedish dialect from *skrá* ['dry skin']), attested in twelfth-century Yorkshire.⁶¹ To denote the wrinkles of age, someone in Yorkshire was named *Grubbi* ('man with rough, wrinkled face'), a name also common to Denmark and Norway.⁶² Another is **Skrifli*, attested in the Lincolnshire place-name *Scrielesbi* from *skrifli* ('fragment', originally derived from *skirfli*, 'an old dilapidated thing, a wreck, more specifically a shipwreck').⁶³ A similar concept is found in *Belgr* in Yorkshire, which can be compared with Old Norse *belgr* ('belly, skin, skin-bag, bellows' = 'dry, withered, old man').⁶⁴ This word is used to denote the aged man in the tenth-century poem *Hávamál*:

at hárum þul
hlæðu aldregi;
opt er gott þat er gamlir kveða;
opt ór skorpum belg
skilin orð koma (st. 134, ll. 5–9).⁶⁵

It is of particular interest that, although all of the feminine names denoting age are neutral in connotation and supposed derivation, these few masculine names are decidedly derogatory in the sense that they call attention to the shriveling-up of the old body, concentrating not such much on years lived as on the debilitating *effects* of old age on the masculine body. The old masculine body may be seen as an object of cultural ridicule in Viking-Age Britain. Nevertheless, one should heed the advice given to Loddfáfnir and not ignore the wisdom of the old bag.

⁶⁰ PNLY, p. 95.

⁶¹ PNLY, p. 252.

⁶² PNLY, p. 109.

⁶³ Cleasby and Guðbrand Vígfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *skirfli*; PNLY, p. 253.

⁶⁴ PNLY, p. 51.

⁶⁵ *Hávamál*, ed. by David A.H. Evans (London, 2000), p. 67: 'never laugh at a hoary sage; often it is good that which is said by the old; often from a dried bag comes credible word'. This verse is from the *Loddfáfnismál* section of the poem to which David Evans suggests 'a tenth-century date would seem to do no violence to the facts': *Hávamál*, p. 28.

Depicting the Old

The importance of skaldic verse as contemporary evidence of social attitudes and events has been, on the whole, overlooked or at least underused.⁶⁶ Roberta Frank summarises the arguments of many sceptical scholars by stating, ‘History may help us to understand Norse court poetry, but skaldic verse can tell us little about history that we did not already know’.⁶⁷ But, as Russell Poole argues concerning Anglo-Saxon England, ‘on occasion skaldic testimony has the value of corroborating details found in other minor sources [...] and adds to our awareness of the deficiencies of the main source’.⁶⁸ The value of skaldic verse as a source for understanding the past is magnified when one considers that skaldic poems express contemporary mentalities of Viking-Age culture, giving a more subtle and potentially more accurate appraisal of social attitudes about youth, age, and life in general. This is not to say that one should be uncritical about the skalds’ subjects of praise: the skalds were bound by certain poetic conventions and traditions, and therefore it is perhaps natural that in the skaldic world of virile heroes and warriors, the young and youth are much better represented than the old. *Ungr konungr* is a favoured phrase, attested in the *Vikingavísur* of Sigvatr Þórðarson referring to Óláfr Haraldsson (c. 1011).⁶⁹ In the eleventh-century *Þorfinnsdrápa*, Arnórr jarlaskáld mentions his *synir ungir* ‘young sons’ (st. 4), and praises Jarl Þorfinnr for being *fimmtán vetra* ‘fifteen winters’ when he began to mount his own raids (st. 5).⁷⁰ A specific occurrence of an ‘old’ modifier is found within *Þorfinnsdrápa* where Þorfinnr is referred to as *kind Rognvalds ens gamla* (‘the heir of Rognvaldr the old’).⁷¹ Diana Whaley points out that in *Orkneyinga saga* the old one, Rognvaldr of Mœrr, is never referred to as *inn gamli* but

⁶⁶ Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 32–33.

⁶⁷ Roberta Frank, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca and London, 1985), pp. 157–96 (p. 174).

⁶⁸ Russell G. Poole, ‘Skaldic Verse in Anglo-Saxon England: Some Aspects of the Period 1009–1016’, *Speculum*, 62/2 (1987), 265–98 (p. 298); see also Judith Jesch, ‘Skaldic Verse and Viking Semantics’, in *Viking Revaluations*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London, 1993), pp. 160–171.

⁶⁹ See Judith Jesch, ‘“Youth on the Prow”: Three Young Kings in the Late Viking Age’, in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York, 2004), pp. 123–39 (pp. 125–28), for poetry praising the youthfulness of Óláfr.

⁷⁰ *Þorfinnsdrápa*, in *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld: An Edition and Study*, ed. by Diana Whaley (Turnhout, 1998), pp. 123–28.

⁷¹ *Þorfinnsdrápa* st. 16, in *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld*, p. 126.

inn ríki ('the mighty'). 'Perhaps Arnórr or others dubbed him with this nickname in order to distinguish him from Rognvaldr Brúsason', the nephew of the praised Þorfinnr.⁷² The *enn gamli* modifier is known but not common within the skaldic corpus, and is most often employed to differentiate a living or praised individual from another with the same name who lived long ago.⁷³

One might intuitively suggest that a skald would not naturally praise someone just for being old, but the emphasis on youth in Old Norse skaldic verse is in direct contrast to the emphasis on things aged and the benefits of age in Old English verse. This is of interest for one might have expected that Old Norse and Old English poetry from the later Viking Age in Britain would express similar attitudes towards the old, arising as it did from a colonial environment with shared cultural reference points. Ashley Crandell Amos notes that there are far more Old English poetic words for the old than for the young.⁷⁴ *Gamol*, a borrowing from Old Norse *gamall*, modifies positively, denoting wisdom and something tested.⁷⁵ 'In the heroic world of Old English poetry, grey or white hair was no stigma', yet Crandell Amos notes that words for old can also be used in a negative sense.⁷⁶ Age connected with wisdom in Old English prose and verse is demonstrated by the use of the word *frod* to mean both 'wise' and/or 'old'.⁷⁷ A simple search of the Old English Corpus Online gives 58 references to *frod*, ranging from descriptions of the ubiquitous aged Methusalah to the hoary hero Hrothgar.

⁷² Whaley *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld*, p. 253.

⁷³ Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquæ Linguae Septentrionalis*, 2nd edn, rev. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1966), s.v. *gamall*.

⁷⁴ Ashley Crandell Amos, 'Old English Words for Old', in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990), pp. 95–106 (p. 98).

⁷⁵ *Gamol* is attested five times in the OEC.

⁷⁶ Crandell Amos 1990, pp. 102–03. One should note that in medieval Christian writings, the old man is often used 'to serve as a repellent image in order to [bear] witness to the decrepitude of creation and to the vanity of the terrestrial world': Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 119. The attention drawn to the negative effects of old age to the body is also present in Old English literature. For example, of five earthly experiences which give one insight into the pains of hell in Vercelli Homily IX, the second is *oferýlða* ('senility'), and shortly after the body falls into decrepitude: *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, ed. by Donald Scragg, Early English Text Series, 300 (Oxford, 1992), Vercelli IX, pp. 159–83 (p. 166). Old age is viewed as a form of divine punishment for original sin, a physical manifestation of the soul's corruption. This is a common theme in early Christian writings.

⁷⁷ See J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 107–09. See also Sánchez-Martí, this volume.

Perhaps a modicum of Anglo-Saxon cultural influence concerning the benefits of old age and associated experience may be appreciated in the eleventh-century anonymous poem *Liðsmannaflokkr* ('The Poem of the War Band'), which tells of Knútr *inn ríki*'s siege and capture of London in 1016.⁷⁸ Although the poem's focus is on the warrior elite, and more specifically the young, virile, masculine elite, as is expected in skaldic verse, the skald refers to a *þolbr glaums* ('fir tree [WARRIOR] of mirth': st. 3), an aged warrior who is not enthusiastic in reddening his sword *í ári* ('in the early time').⁷⁹ An implicit comparison is made in the sexual as well as the martial sense between those who can rise, who are young, abroad and are fighting, and those who cannot rise, who are aged and are obliged to stay at home.⁸⁰ As is seen in the composition of nicknames, the effect of ageing on the male body is ridiculed and despised. But, although he is at first ridiculed in the poem, the worth of the retired fighter is subsequently acknowledged: he is 'allowed the dignity of a proper warrior kenning' with *sveigir gunnborðs Grjótvarar getir* ('the warrior who guards Grjótvar/Steinvqr': st. 3).⁸¹ This particular aged warrior is thus not expected to partake in military campaigns abroad, and the poem implies that his recognized, accepted, and active role lies in the protection of the homeland and Steinvqr. Although this warrior may be chronologically and biologically old, he is surely not considered socially or functionally old, and he remains relevant in this active society.

⁷⁸ Anon., *Liðsmannaflokkr*, ed. by Russell Poole, in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* <<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au>> [accessed 31 November 2006].

⁷⁹ For studies and a translation of the poem, see Russell Poole, 'Skaldic Verse in Anglo-Saxon England: Some Aspects of the Period 1009–1016', *Speculum*, 62/2 (1987), 265–98; Russell Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace* (Toronto, 1991), pp. 90–99; see also A. Cowen, 'Writing Fire and the Sword: the Perception and Representation of Violence in Viking-Age England' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 2004), pp. 210–19.

⁸⁰ The links between penis, tongue and sword in relation to masculinity and vitality are not uncommon in the skaldic and saga tradition, as Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld* implies when he says *verðr emk þriggja sverða* ('three swords I am good for') after King Óláfr Tryggvason provides him with a single weapon: Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld*, *Lausavisur*, 11, ed. by Diana Whaley, in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenkz fornrit, 26 (Reykjavík, 1950). See also Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum* (1993), 363–87.

⁸¹ Poole, *Viking Poems*.

Attending to the Old

So, considering the lack of poetic references to the old and ageing, and considering that old age does not appear to be a major distinguishing factor in mortuary practice, one might justifiably ask if those in Viking-Age Britain were overly concerned about the old? From this survey, it can be said that the old female was not perceived in an absolutely negative light, as some would argue is shown in later Icelandic and medieval textual sources.⁸² A lack of an Old Norse referent to the physical process of female ageing suggests this was not a biological process which concerned the Old-Norse speaking cultural milieu as much as it did those living elsewhere in medieval Europe. The literary and onomastic evidence further suggests that the old male body was ridiculed, perhaps because the young male feared becoming old or, more frighteningly, old, poor, infirm, and thus dependent on others. The old male had more of a social responsibility to remain physically active, rather than just mentally active, and this would seem to correspond with later Icelandic accounts of old men, such as Egill Skalla-Grímsson.⁸³

If one is dependent on others for food, clothing and shelter, one experiences a lack of freedom, thus signifying slavery. Indeed, if one may briefly turn to the Eddaic poem *Rígsþula* (a poem of contested date and origin, but which at the very least reflects cultural commonalities with the colonial culture of Viking-Age Britain),⁸⁴ a similar signifier is evident: the oldest couple Aí and Edda, Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother, are the most impoverished (st. 2).⁸⁵ But it is not the fact they are aged which is contemptible of itself—indeed, Ríg himself is denoted an *aldinn* or ‘aged’ god yet still strong or *qflgan* (st. 1)—but the fact they do nothing save sit by the fire with their white hair. Afi and Amma, or the grandparents, are busy working by the fire (sts 14–16), and the youngest, Mother and Father, are engaged in higher pursuits

⁸² See, for example, Overing, ‘A Body in Question’, Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex’.

⁸³ But see Ármann Jakobsson’s contribution in this volume concerning the cerebral worth rather than physical or masculine prowess of Njáll of Bergþórshváll in *Njáls saga*.

⁸⁴ Ursula Dronke is but one scholar who suggests the poet was at the very least familiar with the multicultural society of early eleventh-century England: *Rígsþula*, in *The Poetic Edda, vol. 2: Mythological Poems*, ed. by Ursula Dronke (Oxford, 1997), p. 207. See Frederic Amory, ‘The Historical Worth of *Rígsþula*’, *alvismál*, 10 (2001), 3–20 for an evaluation of various positions concerning the date, origin and worth of the poem as social source.

⁸⁵ *Rígsþula*, pp. 162–73.

(sts 27–28). The great-grandparents engage in no work, thus they cannot fend for themselves any longer. Although strong and healthy, their son Þræl seems to have inherited at a young age the visage and body of the very old, as he has *hrokkít skinn* ('wrinkled skin') and *lotr hrygg* ('a crippled back').⁸⁶ The implication is clear that when one is aged to the point of infirmity, one is little better than a slave.⁸⁷ This is the main fear of the Viking aged, especially when there existed no system of social welfare to depend upon. The consequences of such poverty and infirmity in old age may perhaps be seen in the manner of death and burial of the elderly at Birsay.

Even if one were chronologically old, like the woman at Scar, or perhaps the warrior in *Liðsmannaflakkr*, one could avoid being labelled as 'old' by maintaining some sort of functional and social usefulness: there were ways to have a successful old age. This Viking-Age emphasis on activity and agency accords well with the modern activity theory of age; that is, to have a successful old age one must remain as active as one was at middle age, in prime of life.⁸⁸ A very similar mentality was current in Viking-Age Britain. Ageing and old age were not stigmatized so long as one remained useful in some way, or provided one was of a social class to be guaranteed provision in old age.⁸⁹ But men and women, rich and poor alike, all dreaded the day they could be perceived as old and useless or *úmætr*, and fought against that.

⁸⁶ *Rígsþula*, st. 8, line 4 and line 9.

⁸⁷ John Hines suggests that *Rígsþula* 'manifestly presents a scheme in which it is the two lower classes that are the working, productive ones'. As such the inactivity of Ái and Edda is even more pronounced. John Hines, 'Myth and Reality: the Contribution of Archaeology', *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense, 2003), pp. 19–39 (p. 33).

⁸⁸ Anne Jamieson, 'Theory and Practice in Social Gerontology', in *Researching Ageing and Later Life*, ed. by Anne Jamieson and Christina R. Victor (Buckingham, 2002), pp. 7–20 (p. 13).

⁸⁹ In this sense, one's accumulated wealth contributed to individual economic usefulness.

THE PATRIARCH: MYTH AND REALITY

Ármann Jakobsson

Old People: Non-Existent or Respected?

Were there old people in Iceland in the Middle Ages? This might seem like a somewhat redundant question. Nevertheless, it seems to be a fairly respectable creed that old people are a relatively recent phenomenon, and especially as a vigorous group of people without a significant role in society. The average life-span has skyrocketed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which has led to the common misconception that very old people must have been rare before this. Even among scholars, we may discern a tendency to be overly conservative when estimating the age of medieval people, as if it is incredible that they would have reached their eighties and nineties. One scholar whose groundbreaking work has laid the foundation for this article is Lúðvík Ingvarsson who has done more work than most other Icelandic scholars in calculating the age of Icelandic chieftains in the age of the Commonwealth (c. 930–1262). Lúðvík seems strangely reluctant to accept that some of these men might have reached their eighties and nineties. When it comes to the oldest group, he has a tendency to be conservative in estimating their ages on the sole grounds that they would be unlikely to have become as old as his calculations would otherwise entail, and often advocating that they must have been born late in their parents' lives, as if to avoid the idea of nonagenarians. On the other hand, it becomes quite evident if we review his calculations and suspend this reticence, that many chieftains are quite likely to have become very old indeed.¹ In fact, I will argue in this article that there is no reason for not assuming that, among the inhabitants of Iceland in 1195 (to take just one not quite random point in history), there were some quite ancient people.

¹ His dating principles are explained in his *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, 1 (Egilsstaðir, 1986), pp. 274–301. Most of them are sound, although there is the occasional case of circular logic (see nn. 33 and 53). Ironically, Lúðvík himself is still alive in his 96th year.

But how were these people regarded? In any discussion of respect for the elderly in a historical perspective, we come up against another myth, i.e., that the modern 'youth culture' and its twin brother, a disrespect for the wisdom and experience of old people, must be recent phenomena, and that in less industrialized (and perhaps more 'primitive') societies, the old had much more important roles as mentors, teachers and patriarchs.² This myth may owe something to studies of ageing that focus on the modern period but use the Middle Ages simply as a contrast, as Philippe Ariès did more than forty years ago when he claimed that the idea of childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages.³ But, like his claim, the idea of more respect for the elderly in pre-industrialized societies is not supported by recent research on old age in the Middle Ages.

Studies of old age were rare until the 1970s and the research done since then indicates that the idea of respected and useful old people was not at all prominent in the Middle Ages—on the contrary, earliest studies of attitudes towards old age, like the work done by Georges Minois, reveal a prevailing negative attitude towards the elderly.⁴ In a previous study, I surveyed Icelandic sources and came indeed to the conclusion that Old Norse sources often portray the old in a somewhat bleak manner. There are some recurring negative types of elderly people in Old Norse texts.⁵ While I believe that these stereotypes reflect a fairly wide-ranging negative image of the elderly in medieval Iceland, I nevertheless do not think that this is the whole truth, and there is indeed also a different myth afloat in twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources: that of a powerful old man or woman who dominates his or her surroundings.

In this article, I will discuss this second positive myth briefly and go on to examine some cases of medieval Icelanders that seem to have

² See, for example, Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: a Cultural History of Ageing in America* (Cambridge, 1992), p. xix: 'improved medical and economic conditions for older people have been accompanied by cultural disenfranchisement—a loss of meaning and vital social roles'.

³ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London, 1962), pp. 33 and 128 [first published as *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien régime* (Paris, 1960)].

⁴ See my review in 'The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 104 (2005), 297–325 (pp. 302–05).

⁵ The three most important are the impotent and angry old viking, the wise but unheard old woman, and the lecherous old fool whose desire for a younger woman leads to trouble: 'The Specter of Old Age,' pp. 301–08.

reached extreme old age, some of whom continued to take an active part in society until their eighties or even beyond. I will furthermore address the possibility that in the Middle Ages, certain old Icelanders were able to remain respected and powerful right until extreme old age and death. That, of course, does not mean that there weren't also those who suffered a sad old age of neglect and disrespect, but in this study, I will focus on the good side of growing old in medieval Iceland.

Grey Power in the Sagas

A well-known respected and powerful man in saga literature is Njáll of Bergþórshváll, the protagonist of *Njáls saga*. He is indeed a patriarch in the literal sense, with a wife and a respectful concubine, four sons and three daughters, and, in addition, he becomes the mentor and surrogate father of the young chieftain Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. Furthermore he acquires two distinguished foster-sons, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson and Hǫskuldr Þráinsson. The former he educates so that becomes one of the greatest lawmen in Iceland. For the latter, he acquires a chieftaincy (*goðorð*), as well as a wife from an important family. As most of his life seems to be spent aiding, defending and dealing with the consequences of the acts of all these sons, foster-sons and protégés, Njáll is indeed, as has been noted, the dominating patriarch of the saga.⁶

No son of Njáll, biological, adopted or surrogate, rebels against the father. Gunnarr may marry Hallgerðr without consulting Njáll and in the end he does disobey him and stays home instead of going abroad.⁷ However, these fatal but isolated acts of independence only serve to accentuate Gunnarr's dependence upon and obedience to Njáll. When Njáll hatches a plan to fool Hrútr, Gunnarr follows it to the letter and continues to do exactly as Njáll says in his various lawsuits at the Alþingi.⁸ Hǫskuldr Þráinsson allows his foster-father to choose a wife for him,⁹ and Njáll's biological sons may marry and acquire their own

⁶ Helga Kress, 'Ekki hófu vér kvennaskap: Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu', in *Sjöttu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Einar Gunnar Pétursson (Reykjavík, 1977), pp. 293–313 (pp. 293–95).

⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), pp. 86–87, 181–84.

⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 59–64, 130–32.

⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 240.

homes but still continue to flock to Bergþórshváll. In the rare instances where they act alone, they appear to have his unspoken blessing.¹⁰ It is only in killing Hǫskuldr that they deliberately and aggressively defy him. And yet this rebellion is short-lived and somewhat ambiguous.¹¹ They are soon back at their father's who then has to lead the effort to get them assistance.¹² Only the eldest son Skarpheðinn rocks the boat in this endeavour and when Flosi and his men arrive to kill them, they all doggedly follow the old man into the house to perish along with him. Again only Skarpheðinn has reservations about how smart that is but, even though the decision concerns his own life, he still does not disobey his father.¹³ Although a strong character, he can only defy him one single time.

The family of Njáll is thus depicted as a benevolent patriarchy: A strong-willed and kind father with obedient sons who constantly seek his guidance, and when they do not, they end up in trouble. Furthermore, they do not stop obeying Njáll when he has become old. When his estate is burned, Njáll is likely to have passed eighty but he is still very much the master of his own house, and this includes all his descendants and extended family. Njáll may not be a physically imposing man. He has no beard and appears, at least in his old age, to be short and light,¹⁴ but that has no effect on his potency. He dominates his little kingdom and all his kin, including his loyal but fierce wife Bergþóra, the heroic Gunnarr, the witty Skarpheðinn, the noble Hǫskuldr, the resolute Kári and the wise Helgi. Njáll indeed proves that old age is no disadvantage, and yet he succumbs to it in the end, when he chooses to die, on the grounds that he is too old to avenge his sons.¹⁵

Njáll's lack of beard makes his power somewhat ambiguous from a gender perspective, but, when it comes to old age and power, I would not hesitate to classify him as a true patriarch. Interestingly, the sagas also provide examples of matriarchs who remain powerful until their

¹⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 115 and 232.

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of the political implications of the act, see William Ian Miller, 'Justifying Skarpheðinn: Of Pretext and Politics in the Icelandic Bloodfeud', *Scandinavian Studies*, 55 (1983), 316–44. Compare with my 'Misvitur er Njáll', *Mímir*, 40 (1992), 53–56.

¹² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 295.

¹³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 326.

¹⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 57, 296.

¹⁵ Cf. Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Specter of Old Age', pp. 305–06.

old age, most strikingly the ancestress of the Laxdæilir family, Unnr the wise. In *Laxdæla saga*, she is presented as a superwoman who is able to bring more men and wealth with her from Scotland than any woman had done before her:

þykkjask menn varla dæmi til finna, at einn kvenmaðr hafi komizk í brott ór þvilikum ófriði með jafnmiklu fé ok fǫruneyti; má af því marka, at hon var mikit afbragð annarra kvenna.¹⁶

Unnr is not hampered by her sex, though it is even more noteworthy for our purposes that neither is she hampered by age. Throughout the first chapters of the saga, she behaves like a queen, sailing to Orkney and then on to Faroe Islands and marrying her grand-daughters off to notables, ending in Iceland, where she refuses to stay with her brother who does not invite her whole entourage to stay. Her other brother *kunni veglyndi systur sinnar* ('knew how magnanimous his sister was'),¹⁷ and invites all of her group. She then settles all the land that she cares for in the Dalir and gives it to her followers. There is no mention of Unnr asking advice or yielding to anyone's opinion. She seems to reign supreme and no-one crosses her, not after her stingy brother has angered her by treating her advent as something less than a royal visit.

While I have called Unnr a matriarch, I do not mean to imply that her power was different from that of Njáll. She is, in fact, a surrogate patriarch, assuming the mantle of a temporary head of the family after the death of her husband and son. And while she is indeed powerful and admirable, her power is never meant to be passed on to her grand-daughters but rather to her only grand-son Óláfr. When Unnr is getting *mjök ellimóð* ('quite old'), she announces that he will be her heir and goes on to find him a wife. It is not related who chose the wife but the grandson replies that he will only marry a woman *at sú ræni þik hvárki fé né ráðum* ('that will not rob you of wealth or authority').¹⁸ Even though Unnr is now so old that she cannot rise from her bed until noon, she is still the master of her household, and it is carefully mentioned in the saga that nobody was allowed to see her in bed and that she scolded

¹⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 5 (Reykjavík, 1934), p. 7: 'it is hardly possible to find another example of a woman having escaped such a war with as much wealth and entourage, which goes to show that she far superseded other women'.

¹⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Laxdæla saga*, p. 11.

everyone who asked about her strength. When the guests arrive at the wedding of her grandson, she is up on her feet and greets them. And when the feast has started, she announces that this house now belongs to Óláfr the grandson. Then she retires:

Eptir þat stóð Unnr upp ok kvazk ganga mundu til þeirar skemmu, sem hon var vön at sofa í; það at þat skyldi hverr hafa at skemmtan, sem þá var næst skapi, en mungát skyldi skemmta alþýðunni. Svá segja menn, at Unnr hafi verit bæði há ok þreklig; hon gekk hart útar eptir skálanum; fundusk mönnum orð um, at konan var enn virðulig.¹⁹

The next morning, Óláfr finds his grandmother dead, propped against the pillows in her sleeping chamber. It is no coincidence that the old woman dies in an upright position. The emphasis in the narrative is on how she keeps control over her life and her estate, how she retains her dignity right up until her death and how she is firmly in command, in spite of her age. It is almost like a fairy-tale narrative about an old woman who does not permit age to get the better over her, and who is allowed to be the mistress of her household right until the end. It is hard to find a better example of 'grey power' in the sagas. As a matriarch, Unnr is even more potent than Njáll, although she nevertheless has more or less abdicated before she dies.

Both these narratives can be regarded as mythmaking texts, the myth being that an old person can retain all his other power, command the respect, admiration and obedience of the young, and dominate his or her surroundings. It must be emphasized that the Unnr and Njáll we meet in the sagas are literary figures, even though both probably existed, and thus their depiction in *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* is at least partly the invention of an author/historian depicting an ideal. And yet there is still a limit to the idealized nature of this narrative. In spite of the respect Unnr gets, what she is doing is actually leaving the world gracefully and dying with same dignity that she lived. And even the powers of Njáll are limited. In the end, he acknowledges that he cannot really go on living since he cannot guard his honour due to his old age: *ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna* ('I am an old man and not fit to avenge my sons').²⁰ Thus the old cannot replace the young,

¹⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 12–13: 'After that, Unnr stood up and said that she would walk to the hall where she usually slept; asked that everyone feasted as they wished, but all would have enough to drink. People say that Unnr was both tall and sturdy, she walked vigorously out from the hall, and people remarked that she was still dignified'.

²⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 330.

but they do have their own ways of keeping their dignity, as Njáll and Bergþóra demonstrate in death.

But did Unnr and Njáll have any actual twelfth- and thirteenth-century counterparts, old people who remained vigorous and powerful to a very advanced age? Now I shall explore some cases of active old people, to ascertain whether the portrayals of Unnr and Njáll in some degree corresponded to reality.

The Clergy in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland

When speaking of old people in twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources, the first step seems to be to clarify how old these people actually became. As I mentioned above, the knowledge of the low average life-span of pre-industrialized society, coupled perhaps with a twentieth-century belief in progress in all fields, seems to result in a reluctance to believe in the existence of extremely old people in twelfth- or thirteenth-century Iceland. On the other hand, I would argue that there is no reason not to expect some genuine cases of nonagenarians or centenarians, keeping in mind that many of the documented centenarians and super-centenarians of the twentieth century reached their advanced age without much aid from modern technology. Of course, extremely old people would have been much fewer than in the rich societies of our century. Infant mortality took its toll. In Iceland, the thirteenth century was violent and many notable men were killed in the conflicts of the age. Bad nourishment, a lack of antibiotics, and a lack of hygiene would also have taken their toll. Thus the average thirteenth-century Icelander would not have expected to reach his seventieth, eightieth and, less, still his ninetieth birthday. But, nevertheless, there was in all likelihood a substantial number of people who became old by modern standards.

It is extremely hard to calculate with any accuracy how long medieval Icelanders lived. To begin with, the sagas and other extant sources for the period mostly concern the ruling class, the rich and the powerful. There is, indeed, nothing average about the protagonists of *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. The sagas also provide us with a somewhat small portion of firm dates. The ages of Unnr and Njáll can only be guessed in relations to the events depicted in the respective sagas, along with the fact that when he dies Njáll has children in their fifties and Unnr is a great-grandmother at the time of her death. The sagas also inform us that Snorri goði died at 67, and Egill Skalla-Grímsson died after his

eightieth birthday.²¹ But we do not know exactly how old Njáll was when he perished in the flames, or whether Hallgerðr langbrók survived to her sixties or seventies. Even those dates we do possess must be regarded as uncertain, since the gap between the events and the sources is in most cases more than two centuries. On the other hand, the dates for most of the early Icelandic bishops and many of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century notables who figure in the narratives of *Sturlunga saga* may be regarded as more accurate, given that the sources are almost contemporary.²²

We have somewhat reliable data concerning the age of the bishops of Iceland, which allows us to state with some certainty that nine of the first thirteen Icelandic bishops lived past the age of 67. Taking the Skálholt bishops first, Ísleifr Gizurarson (d. 1080) died at 74, Gizurr Ísleifsson (d. 1118) died at 76, Þorlákr Runólfsson (d. 1133) at 48, Magnús Einarsson (d. 1148) at 50, and Klængur Þorsteinsson (d. 1176) at 71.²³ St Þorlákr died at the age of 60 in 1193 and his successor Páll Jónsson at 56 in 1211.²⁴ It is uncertain how old was the eighth bishop, Magnús Gizuraron (d. 1237), but as he is said to have been fostered by St Þorlákr, and since this fostering is more likely to have happened at Skálholt (where Þorlákr sat after 1178) than in the saint's previous ministry at Þykkvibær, it seems likely that Magnús was under the bishop's guidance (and, given his later career, as his pupil) as a teenager.²⁵ Thus, he would probably have been born between 1160 and 1170 and died at the age of between 67 and 77.

²¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 186; *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), p. 296.

²² Lúðvík Ingvarsson introduces some of his most important sources in his *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, pp. 209–62. Among them are *Landnámabók* and its list of important chieftains in 930, and *Kristni saga* and its lists of important chieftains in 981 and 1118. *Kristni saga* also includes a list of important priests ordained in the reign of Gizurr Ísleifsson and a thirteenth-century manuscript in *Diplomatarium Islandicum* lists some 40 noble priests alive in 1143. Apart from these lists, *Landnámabók*, *Sturlunga saga* and the bishops' sagas are most useful when it comes to calculating the age of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelanders.

²³ *Hungrvaka*, ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 16 (Reykjavík, 2002), pp. 10–11, 18–20, 26, 33, 40–41.

²⁴ *Þorláks saga*, ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 16 (Reykjavík, 2002), p. 83; *Páls saga*, ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 16 (Reykjavík, 2002), p. 328.

²⁵ *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Kristján Eldjárn and Magnús Finnbogason, 1 (Reykjavík, 1946), p. 140.

Apart from Magnús Einarsson who perished in a notorious fire which claimed the lives of between 70 and 82 people, all these bishops died of natural causes.²⁶ The cause of death is then always unknown, but it seems fairly likely that at least one of the three bishops who died at 47, 56 and 60 would have been a cancer victim.²⁷ The other four bishops went on ruling their diocese until their late 60s or 70s, retiring only in death.

Lacking a source comparable to *Hungrvaka*, the history of the five first bishops of Skálholt, there is less certainty when it comes to the age of the Hólar bishops. The first five all reached a somewhat high age. Jón Ögmundarson (d. 1121), who much later became a saint, died at 69, according to his saga.²⁸ Ketill Þorsteinsson was just over seventy (*vel sjautogr*, which may mean about 72) when he died of a stroke in a hot tub at Laugarvatn in 1145, after a grand feast in Skálholt, reminding the medieval as well as the modern reader that too much feasting may damage the health of elderly clergymen.²⁹ The fifth Hólar bishop, Guðmundr Arason (d. 1237), also a saint after his death, was 76 when he died, and although he had become poor of health after a turbulent life on the run from his adversaries, he was still in office and not considering retirement.³⁰ It cannot be stated with accuracy how old the third bishop of Hólar, Björn Gilsson (d. 1162), became. Although he seems to have been considered close to the saints in his holiness, he does not play a significant role in any medieval narrative. As his great-grandmother (the legendary Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir) was born in around 980, it seems unlikely that Björn was born much later than between 1090 and 1095.³¹ That would fit in with the fact that he is said to have been a pupil of Teitr Ísleifsson in Haukadalr (d. 1110) and then of bishop Jón Ögmundarson at Hólar, which would make it

²⁶ *Hungrvaka*, pp. 31–32.

²⁷ Although depictions of the sicknesses of the bishops are somewhat detailed, they do not help much to ascertain the cause of death (see e.g. *Hungrvaka*, pp. 19, 26, 40).

²⁸ *Jóns saga*, ed. by Peter Foote, Ólafur Halldórsson and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Íslensk fornrit, 15 (Reykjavík, 2003), p. 239.

²⁹ *Hungrvaka*, pp. 30–31.

³⁰ *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 121, 400; *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, in *Biskupa sögur*, III, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1953), p. 416.

³¹ The conservative Lúdvík Ingvarsson argues for 1095 as his year of birth. He also assumes that Guðríðr had her youngest son Björn in 1025, but does not give any reason for this assumption, see his *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, 3 (Egilsstaðir, 1987), p. 388. It seems more likely that this Björn was born earlier, which might indicate an even earlier date of birth for his namesake and grandson the bishop.

very unlikely that he was born after 1100.³² Thus it seems likely that he only became bishop in his late fifties and died at approximately the same age as his two predecessors, between 69 and 72 years old.

For our purposes, the most interesting figure is the fourth bishop of Hólar, Brandr Sæmundarson (d. 1201), and it seems a safe assumption that he was the longest-lived Icelandic bishop before 1237.³³ Brandr was closely related to bishops Björn Gilsson and Þorlákr Runólfsson. The renowned scholar Sæmundr Sigfússon (c. 1054–1133), was of the same generation as Brandr's father, while his mother was of the same generation as the bishop Þorlákr Runólfsson who was born in 1085 (with a great-grandmother born in 980). Brandr's father was the grand-uncle of Sturla Þórðarson who was born in 1115. Brandr's wife and the wife of the well-known priest Páll Sölvason were sisters. All this genealogical information seems to indicate that Brandr would be expected to be born no later than around 1110. Indeed, his son-in-law was actually born before 1120.³⁴ Nevertheless, Brandr is not mentioned as a priest in the lists of priests of noble birth in 1143, even though he was certainly of a good family, but that does not prove that he was born after 1113, since people came to the priesthood at various ages.³⁵ His predecessors at the see of Hólar were 54, around 49 and just over fifty when they became bishops so it seems likely that he was also around

³² Björn is mentioned in several sagas, see *Jóns saga*, pp. 182, 218–19, 255; Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Formáli,' *Eiríks saga rauða: Texti Skálholtsbókar* (Reykjavík, 1985), pp. 384–86 (this is an appendix to Íslenzk fornrit, 4).

³³ Lúðvík Ingvarsson seems to have a hard time believing that Brandr became old: 'Ólíklegt er, að hann hafi orðið meira en áttæður. Hann fór í erfið ferðalög á síðasta áratug ævi sinnar, þrátt fyrir krankleika' ('It is unlikely that he became older than eighty. He undertook arduous travels in the last decade of his life, in spite of sickness'): *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, III, p. 392. As a principle of dating, this is quite useless. There are several cases of clerical functionaries undertaking arduous travelling in their old age, and Brandr's sickness appears only in one miracle, where it is also stated that he became well again (*Jóns saga*, pp. 272, 277). On the other hand, Lúðvík's other principles of calculating the age of chieftains would indicate that Brandr was much older (see n. 34).

³⁴ Brandr's genealogy is discussed in Lúðvík Ingvarsson's *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, III, pp. 392–94. According to Lúðvík, Brandr's mother was probably born around 1085. Brandr's father was Sæmundr Grímsson, his brother Svertingr was the grandfather of Sturla Þórðarson. The son-in-law is Páll Þórðarson of Vatnsfjörðr, who is likely to have been born around 1120, assuming that his father had him at a late age (Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, III, pp. 263–64).

³⁵ *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, ed. by Jón Sigurðsson (Copenhagen, 1857–76), I, pp. 185–86. On the subject of the canonical age and the actual practice in ordaining priests before 30 much has been written, most recently Magnús Stefánsson, 'Kong Sverres alder og prestevigsel', *Historisk tidsskrift*, 85 (2006), 279–88.

that age, and born, then, perhaps in 1113.³⁶ In *Þorláks saga*, he is said to be *afgamall* ('ancient') or *mjök gamall* in 1193–95.³⁷

If we believe, as seems most likely, that Brandr died at 85 or even 90, he is a good example of a vigorous and powerful man, even though he is very old. He was one of the prime instigators when the remains of St Þorlákr were translated in 1198, and in 1200, he supervised the translation of the bones of St Jón and Björn Gilsson. He was also settling disputes and actively participating in them in the last years of his life.³⁸ In 1200, he is said to be extremely ill, which, if we believe in the age I have suggested above, is more likely to have been due to his old age than any lethal disease. Indeed, the illness might have been a manageable one as bishop Brandr actually becomes well through the intermediation of St Jón, and is, in fact, mentioned in several of his earliest miracles.³⁹ He is also sometimes credited with choosing his successor, Guðmundr Arason.⁴⁰

It thus seems fairly likely that Brandr Sæmundarson was not only still in office at 85 or 90, but putting his mark on local and national disputes, as well as on Icelandic church history. It is, in fact, perfectly possible that he was even older than that, although there is no real reason to believe that he was past 55 when elected. However, there are at least two cases of sexagenarians who ran for the office of bishop in Iceland and one was even elected, though not ordained.

Hallr Teitsson was elected bishop of Skálholt after the untimely death of Magnús Einarsson in 1148. There is no question that Hallr was older than Magnús. His grandfather was born in 1006, his uncle in 1042 and his father Teitr probably around the same date, as he died in 1110 or 1111 and was the teacher of Ari the learned, who was born in 1068. Hallr was ordained as a priest before 1118 and appears in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, which takes place in that year, as a mature chieftain.⁴¹ He is unlikely to be born later than 1085 but might well be older. In *Hungrvaka*, he is reputed to have been a very learned

³⁶ Seven out of twelve of the other Icelandic bishops from 1056 to 1237 are likely to have been 45–54 years when they took office.

³⁷ *Þorláks saga*, pp. 84, 192.

³⁸ *Þorláks saga*, pp. 86, 97, 195, 203, 254, 300, 308; *Jóns saga*, pp. 255, 269–78; *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 140–43, 192–95, 210–11.

³⁹ *Jóns saga*, pp. 269–78.

⁴⁰ *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 142–43.

⁴¹ *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), pp. 20–21; *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 32, 38–39.

man. Nevertheless, he seems not to have been ordained as a bishop and was on his way back from the pope when he died in 1150. It is unclear why he should have thought it necessary to go to Rome in the first place since previous bishops usually just went to the archbishop of Lund.⁴² It is also unclear whether he did get papal approval but died before reaching the archbishop. However, according to church laws, there were several reasons to reject him as a bishop. Most of them would have applied to other Icelanders bishops as well, who nevertheless took office. In any case, a man who was perhaps close to seventy might not have been seen as an ideal candidate for such an arduous task.⁴³ But, as he was elected, this demonstrates that an old man could be considered up to the job.

Another somewhat old candidate for the office of bishop was Páll Sölvason who sought the office after Klængur Þorsteinsson announced his wish to retire in 1174. Páll must at that time have been quite old. His wife was the sister of Brandr Sæmundarson's wife which might indicate that he and Brandr were of a similar age, which would make Páll over sixty. Unlike Brandr, Páll has been priest for decades when he sought office; he is mentioned as a priest in the list of 1143, and in *Hungrvaka*, he is mentioned as one of the most important men in the Skálholt diocese in 1148.⁴⁴ He would thus be likely to have been born around 1110 (and he died in 1185), since his grandfather was born in about 1048 and his paternal aunt was the stepmother of Bishop Magnús Einarsson who was born in 1098.⁴⁵ Then, Páll was seeking this high office at around 65 years of age, and while his age may not have been to his advantage, he was nevertheless quite clearly a serious candidature.⁴⁶

We thus have two instances of sexagenarians seeking the office of bishop of Skálholt in the twelfth century, and an octogenarian or even a nonagenarian presiding over important church functions in 1200.

⁴² *Hungrvaka*, pp. 25, 34.

⁴³ I have discussed this previously, see 'Byskupskjör á Íslandi: Stjórnmalaviðhorf byskupasagna og Sturlungu', *Studia theologica islandica*, 14 (2000), 171–82 (pp. 175–76). Cf. Magnús Stefánsson, 'Kirkjuvald eflist', in *Saga Íslands* (Reykjavík 1975), II, pp. 137–39; Gryt Anne Piebenga, 'Hallr andaðiz í Trekt', *Saga*, 31 (1993), 159–68.

⁴⁴ *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, I, p. 186; *Hungrvaka*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ See Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, 2 (Egilsstaðir, 1986), pp. 389–98. Cf. *Morkinskinna*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1932), pp. 142–43.

⁴⁶ *Þorláks saga*, pp. 62–54. See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Byskupskjör á Íslandi', pp. 180–81.

This may possibly be read in context with the myth that *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* proselytize: that old people can indeed be powerful right to their last day.

Aged Chieftains in Medieval Iceland

Of course, popes and bishops would have had a much better chance of becoming very old than worldly leaders. In the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there are at least five popes who died at the age of almost ninety: Lucius III (d. 1185), Celestine III (d. 1198), Gregory IX (d. 1241), Celestine V (d. 1298), and John XXII (d. 1334). On the other hand, the life of the medieval aristocrat would have been stressful and his nourishment probably unhealthy (gout and indigestion were later considered the two most relentless enemies of the Habsburgs).⁴⁷ To take the most handy examples from neighbouring countries, every single king of Norway before 1387 died before sixty (King Sverrir and Hákon Hákonarson probably dying at 58 and 59), if we exclude the quasi-mythical King Harold Finehair who lived to 85 (the average age of mythical figures being somewhat higher than the rest of us). Before 1603, only six English kings passed sixty and none of them reached their seventies. Only two Danish kings are known to have lived to their sixtieth birthday before 1500 and Louis XIV (d. 1615) was the first French king to pass the age of sixty-two since Charlemagne (d. 814). It is also noteworthy that the minority of these foreign kings were killed in battle or by accident. Most died by natural causes quite young and even younger than the average Icelandic chieftain.

It seems reasonable to expect that Icelandic chieftains were more likely to die sooner than bishops. To take a few well documented thirteenth-century examples, Gizurr Þorvaldsson (d. 1268) died at 59, Óláfr Þórðarson (d. 1259) probably at 47, Þórður kakali (d. 1256) at about 46, and Arnórr Tumason (d. 1221) and his son Kolbeinn the young (d. 1245) died at the age of between 35 and 40, all of natural causes. This would undoubtedly be considered young today and we must keep in mind that these were the aristocrats of Iceland, men who lived their lives under much more favourable conditions than the general population, even if we take into consideration that the thirteenth century was

⁴⁷ See, for example, Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Habsburgs: Embodying Empire* (London 1995), pp. 135–38.

the Sturlung Age, an age of conflict in Iceland. On the other hand, there are also many examples of Icelandic chieftains who reached a much higher age and some of them were vigorous right to their last days. While their lifestyles are likely to have been less luxurious than their European counterparts, this does not seem to have had a negative effect on their life-span and might even have had a positive effect on their health (less feasting and eating of meat being more advantageous than not). While their age is usually harder to ascertain than the bishops, I will discuss five cases below.

The son of the aforementioned Hallr Teitsson (d. 1150) was Gizurr Hallsson who rose to become the lawspeaker of Iceland, retiring in 1200 and dying in 1206. According to *Þorláks saga* and *Páls saga*, he spent the last two decades of his life in Skálholt, having retired to the seat of the bishop in his old age.⁴⁸ This indicates that he was already considered an old man long before he died. In *Sturlunga saga*, he is reputed to have travelled widely in his youth, to have reached Rome and written the travel book *Flos peregrinatis*, and to have become the Marshal of the Norwegian king before 1152.⁴⁹ This would seem to suggest some maturity as the Marshal was an important royal office. *Hungrvaka* reveals that Gizurr was fostered by Bishop Þorlákr Runólfsson, who died in 1133. It seems likely that Gizurr was first and foremost his student and as the text seems to suggest that he spent some time with the bishop, this alone indicates that it is very unlikely that Gizurr was born later than 1120.⁵⁰ In fact, he is even more likely to have been born a while before that, considering his achievements before 1150 and his father's age. Lúðvík Ingvarsson did argue that he was younger, but that depends on his assumption that no man can be named after a living person, and since it is likely that Gizurr Hallsson bore the name of his grand-uncle Gizurr Ísleifsson, he would then be born after 1118.⁵¹ Unfortunately, this 'rule' is undocumented, there are several exceptions to it, and indeed some cases of many persons in the same family sharing the same name at the same time.⁵² In fact, Lúðvík has no documented evidence for his assumption, he simply makes a statement

⁴⁸ *Þorláks saga*, pp. 80–85, 185–91; *Páls saga*, pp. 300, 314; *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 139. Þorvaldr Gizurarson, his son, is already a mature chieftain long before the death of St Þorlákr, dying in 1235.

⁴⁹ *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 60; *Hungrvaka*, p. 35.

⁵⁰ *Hungrvaka*, p. 25.

⁵¹ *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, II, p. 254.

⁵² See e.g. the data presented by Philadelphia Ricketts, this volume.

that he and some unmentioned colleagues believe this was the rule in the Commonwealth era.⁵³ Indeed it helps him to reach a more precise birth date for several chieftains, whom he prefers to make as young as possible. But, sadly, the existence of such a custom is unsupported by any tangible evidence and cannot be used to determine anyone's age in twelfth-century Iceland.

Even if Gizurr Hallsson was born after 1118, he would still be holding the office of lawspeaker at an advanced age. If he was born around 1115, he first retired at 85, and then went on to reach the age of 90. When he gives the funeral speech for St. Þorlákr in 1193, and is a witness to several of his miracles, Gizurr is clearly an extremely vigorous old man, who enjoys power and respect right to an extremely high age.⁵⁴ It is also remarkable that two of the prime movers in Þorlákr's elevation to sainthood in 1198 and the genesis of the bishops' sagas should be close to, or even past, eighty at that date.⁵⁵ And Gizurr went on scheming past that date. In 1201, he is trying to get his son Magnús getting elected bishop. According to *Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar*, it is Gizurr himself who is the main champion for his son. The old man does not need to relegate such an important task to anyone else, although he has mature sons of great distinction.

Gizurr Hallsson's son-in-law was the chieftain Sigurðr Ormsson. His wife, Þuríður Gizurardóttir, had been married before and she cannot be born much later than 1150—in fact, she could easily be older.⁵⁶ Sigurðr is palpably a mature chieftain and man of property in 1179.⁵⁷ He is then very active for several decades and seems to be in the prime of his

⁵³ *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, I, p. 275: 'Ýmsum hefir lengi verið ljóst, að á þjóðveldisöld var barn aldrei látið heita í höfuð á lifandi manni. Er talið, að þetta sé leif frá heiðni. Við nákvæma athugun á ættum goðorðsmanna hefi ég ekki rekist á nokkurt dæmi um, að maður, sem barn var látið heita eftir, væri á lífi, er barninu var gefið nafn. [...] Því má treysta, að maður, sem nefndur er eftir öðrum manni á þessum tíma, er fæddur eftir að sá var dáinn, sem nafnið bar fyrir'. To be fair, Lúðvík actually mentions some exceptions himself. It could also be argued that in those cases, the younger of the two namesakes was not 'named after' the older, but to my mind that only accentuates the uselessness of this dating principle.

⁵⁴ *Þorláks saga*, pp. 80–85, 185–91.

⁵⁵ Gizurr is mentioned as a chief source of *Hungryvaka* in the saga itself (p. 3) and may well be its instigator.

⁵⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 164. Þuríður was the mother of Halldóra Tumadóttir, wife of Sighvatur Sturluson (b. 1170). She is a grandmother in 1198. Her previous husband was much older than she, born no later than c. 1125 (Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, III, p. 418).

⁵⁷ *Þorláks saga*, p. 164.

life around 1200.⁵⁸ In 1211, however, he retires and enters a convent along with his wife, who dies in 1224.⁵⁹ Sigurður himself, however, does not die until 1235, and seems safe to assume that he was at least 85 at the time of his death, if not close to 90 or even 95. In this case, however, the old chieftain does not cling on to his power until his death but retires more than two decades earlier, and then goes on to a very long life in retirement.

Three further cases of extreme longevity of twelfth-century chieftains may also be mentioned. Hermundr Koðráns­son of Gilsbakki is reputed in *Grœnlendinga þáttr* to have been captaining a ship in around 1130.⁶⁰ His great-grandfather would have been born in around 980 and Hermundr seems to be an important chieftain in the 1140s.⁶¹ As a friend of Páll Sǫlvason, he may have been about the same age, or a little older, if we accept the testimony of *Grœnlendinga þáttr*, born perhaps in 1105–10. He would then have reached the impressive age of 90, dying in 1197. One of his contemporaries was Þorleifr beiskaldi of Hítardalur who was already a chieftain there when bishop Magnús perished in a fire in 1148.⁶² His grand-daughter married Páll Jónsson bishop, who was born in 1155. Þorleifr's genealogy, according to Lúðvík Ingvarsson, suggests that he might have been born between 1104 and 1108, although Lúðvík is so reluctant to accept the idea of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelanders reaching their nineties that he claims that Þorleifr must have been a little younger.⁶³ Þorleifr was much involved in disputes in the middle of the twelfth century but is still taking part in legal quarrels in 1186.⁶⁴ According to *Þorláks saga*, he was present at the translation of St Þorlákr in 1198, and would at the very least have

⁵⁸ *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 237–38.

⁵⁹ *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 258–60.

⁶⁰ *Grœnlendinga þáttr*, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 279. Although the late fourteenth-century date of this narrative detracts somewhat from its source value, it otherwise seems credible.

⁶¹ *Hungrvaka*, p. 32. *Hungrvaka* actually mentions a 'Guðmundr Koðráns­son', who is not known from other sources, but it is possibly that this is Hermundr himself.

⁶² See *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 95–96, where Sturla taunts Þorleifr for having burned bishop Magnús and then been drawn crying from the fire.

⁶³ *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, III, p. 79: 'líklegra er, að Þorleifur hafi orðið 82 ára en hann hafi 92 ára gamall'. This is just nonsense. It seems far more likely that he was born before 1110, as his granddaughter is likely to have been born around 1155, since that is the birth year of Páll and his saga claims that he married young (*Páls saga*, p. 297).

⁶⁴ *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 231.

been in his eighties, if not in his nineties, dying in 1200.⁶⁵ Another contemporary of Sturla Þórðarson, Páll Sölvason and Bishop Brandr was Magnús Guðmundsson in Hjarðarholt, whose father was considered one of the most important priests to be ordained in Gizurr Ísleifsson's day (he died in 1118). Magnús is unlikely to have been born later than 1120, and he is still around at the turn of the century, presenting his estate to Sighvatr Sturluson in 1197, after having made a deal with his father Sturla Þórðarson decades before.⁶⁶

Of course, the cases I have discussed here are likely to have been the exception rather than the rule. But it is noteworthy how many important Icelanders born in the early 1100s are still around at the very end of the century and some still very active (Gizurr Hallsson, Páll Sölvason, Brandr Sæmundarson, Hermundur Koðránsson, Þorleifr beiskaldi and Magnús Guðmundsson). This suggests that we cannot assume that Commonwealth chieftains could not reach the same age as elderly statesmen, such as Winston Churchill and Deng Xiaoping, reached in the war-like twentieth century. It also means that we cannot entirely discard the evidence of *Landnámabók* and *Kristni saga*, which list Eyjólfur Valgerðarson, the father of Guðmundr the powerful, as one of the leading chieftains in the country both in 930 and 981.⁶⁷ Eyjólfur probably died shortly before 990 and would then have been a very old man, even though he must have been quite young in 930. Scholars such as Lúðvík Ingvarsson and Jakob Benediktsson have indeed tended to question the claim that Eyjólfur was already a chieftain in 930.⁶⁸ However, if we accept the rest of this particular list of chieftains as accurate, it seems more logical to assume that he was, and the number of chieftains reaching their 80s or 90s in the late twelfth century would seem to allow us some scope for that.

There are also some striking examples of longevity in the thirteenth century. Snælaug Høgnadóttir was involved in the notorious dispute of her father and St Þorlákr around 1183. She had already had a child out of wedlock when she married Þórðr Bøðvarsson, with whom she conceived and gave birth to the important chieftains Þorleifr of Garðar

⁶⁵ *Þorláks saga*, p. 97; *Páls saga*, p. 308.

⁶⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 234. Magnús's father, Guðmundur Brandsson, was a candidate for bishop around 1120 (*Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 36) and died in 1151: *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed. by Gustav Storm (Christiania, 1888), p. 114.

⁶⁷ *Landnámabók*, p. 396; *Kristni saga*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, III, p. 509; *Landnámabók*, p. 397 n. 5.

and Þoðvarr of Bær. In the early 1180s, her sister is married to a mature chieftain and it seems likely that Snælaug is at least in her twenties, but she did not die until 1249.⁶⁹ One of the most important Icelandic dignitaries of the 1290s was Snorri Ingimundarson the fat (d. 1301). His father died in 1231, which would seem to make Snorri in his 70s at the time his power reached its zenith. In the late fourteenth century, there is Þorsteinn Eyjólfsson the lawman who is one of the most powerful men of Iceland in the 1350s and is still lawman (*lögmaðr*) in 1402. As his mother is likely to have been born around 1290, this Þorsteinn is probably around eighty when he holds this important office.⁷⁰

Another lawman of the late fourteenth century was Ormr Snorrason, son of Snorri Narfason. This Snorri was the brother to the Þórðr Narfason who was probably helping Sturla Þórðarson compose *Íslendinga saga* in 1271. He is a mature chieftain in the 1280s and therefore very unlikely to have been born after 1260. His son Ormr is mentioned as an important man in 1344 and becomes a lawman in 1359. He then goes on to live until after 1401, outlasting all his sons which meant a massive concentration of wealth in the hands of his grand-son Loftir Guttormsson (d. 1432). How old did Ormr become? Einar Bjarnason, who is as conservative as Lúðvík Ingvarsson when it comes to the very old, assumes that he was born in 1315–20.⁷¹ There is no special reason to assume that he might not have been older still and thus he could even have been managing his property until his late nineties.

At last there is the well-known example of Gizurr galli Bjarnarson who is believed to have died in 1370, at the age of 101.⁷² This might seem unlikely at first, but why not? The fact of the matter is that we have no reason to believe that medieval Icelanders could not reach their centenary, or even become 110, although there is no documented evidence of such an age.⁷³

⁶⁹ *Þorláks saga*, pp. 169–73; *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 131.

⁷⁰ On Þorsteinn and his genealogy, see Einar Bjarnason, *Íslenzkir ættstuðlar*, 3 (Reykjavík, 1972), pp. 245–58.

⁷¹ Einar Bjarnason, *Íslenzkir ættstuðlar*, 1 (Reykjavík, 1969), pp. 179–95.

⁷² According to the Flatey annals (*Íslandske Annaler*, pp. 383, 411).

⁷³ In fact, only two Icelandic women are documented to have reached the age of 109, both of them born in 1897.

Conclusion

In 1198, the notables of Iceland gathered at Skálholt to be present at the translation of Iceland's first saint. The ancient bishop of Hólar travelled south, the lawspeaker was present, as well as Þorleifr of Hítardal. These were all extremely old men but they must have still retained some of their vigour, as well as their formal powers. One might wonder whether such a situation could not easily have served the basis for characters such as Unnr djúpúðga and Njáll of Bergþórshváll. Although these two might seem idealized, they undoubtedly had some basis in reality. In twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, there were some old people who continued to be powerful long past their eightieth birthday and who even accomplished great things in their last years, such as Brandr Sæmundarson. Iceland was never a society ruled by elders but they were there and they could yield as much power as they sometimes do in the sagas.

Of course, when it came to the second quarter of the thirteenth century, they were the exception rather than the rule. The conflict of the Sturlung Age was first and foremost a young man's game. Chieftains such as Kolbeinn Tumason, Arnór Tumason, Sturla Sighvatsson, Kolbeinn the young, Órækja Snorrason, Brandr Kolbeinsson, Þórður kakali and Þorgils skarði all reached the top at a very young age. None of them lived to see 50. Snorri Sturluson, on the other hand, was still actively seeking power in his sixties, although he was very much the loser of the conflict with his nephew Sturla. When his brother Sighvatur Sturluson was killed at Örygsstaðir at the age of 68, he had become a part of his son's entourage, rather than the leader of their combined forces. But the story of the battle of Örygsstaðir in *Sturlunga saga* also includes an example of courageous old man, Árni Auðunsson, who dies trying to protect his master Sighvatur, when he is in his seventies.⁷⁴ Even for the very old, heroism was possible in thirteenth-century Iceland, as well as power. And *Sturlunga saga* often seem to take the point of view of the old, since it also demonstrates how the immaturity of young chieftains could lead to their early demise, in the narrative of the Þorvaldssynir, allies of Snorri Sturluson.⁷⁵ Sometimes the old possessed qualities that

⁷⁴ *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 434.

⁷⁵ See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Snorri and His Death: Youth, Violence, and Autobiography in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies*, 75 (2003), 317–40.

the young did not and thirteenth-century saga writers were well aware of that. At least, there is no shortage of elderly notables in the late thirteenth and the fourteenth century.

In spite of reaching such a high age, Brandr Sæmundarson, Gizurr Hallsson, as well as several post-Sturlung Age chieftains, managed to retire or die peacefully at a very advanced age, and do not seem to have been regarded as obstacles by zealous young men. Gizurr Hallsson demonstrates how to do this when he leaves for Skálholt in his late sixties or early seventies and leaves his son Þorvaldr in power in his *goðorð*, while he continues as a lawspeaker and interfering in the affairs of the two bishoprics. In the Middle Ages, it could occasionally become problematic when old chieftains or old monarchs held all the power in their own hands, leaving their grown sons without a role and lacking the responsibility to be proper men.⁷⁶ Whether *Njáls saga* takes this view, we cannot be certain. In that particular case, father seems to know best, but *Njáls saga* is admittedly a complex narrative, open to multiple interpretations. What we do know is that as an old man of power, Njáll had parallels in the reality known to early thirteenth-century Icelanders. Icelandic aristocrats sometimes became very old and they clung to their power as long as they could.

⁷⁶ Cf. William M. Aird, 'Frustrated Masculinity: The Relationship between William the Conqueror and his Eldest Son', *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Dawn M. Hadley (Harlow, 1999), pp. 39–55.

EGILL SKALLA-GRÍMSSON:
A VIKING POET AS A CHILD AND AN OLD MAN

Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova

The main hero of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, one of the most loved and most disputed Icelandic family sagas, is not only remarkable for being a hardshell viking and an outstanding, innovative poet, presumably author of six major poems and roughly fifty single stanzas. He is one of very few saga heroes whose life is thoroughly described from early infancy to senility. According to the saga, Egill composed poetry from the age of three until his death at the very high age of approximately eighty years.¹ This is apparently unique, since Icelandic family sagas describe other skalds composing poetry only in particular periods of their lives; most often the mature period. Icelandic family sagas do not register other major skalds than Egill (for instance, Kormákr, Gunnlaugr, Þormóðr) composing as children, even though occasional stanzas by children (who are not main characters) are found in the sagas. Only few principle skalds in the sagas become old and simultaneously remain at the core of the saga narrative; one of them is Hólmǫnngu-Bersi from *Kormáks saga*, some of whose stanzas can be compared with Egill's old age stanzas. It is only Egill's poetic career, as described in the saga, that spans his entire life from childhood to old age.

In the present paper I will use this unique opportunity to describe a viking poet as a child and an old man. To this effect, I will examine two groups of free-standing stanzas ascribed to Egill by *Egils saga*:

1. three stanzas which Egill composed as a child, and
2. five stanzas which he composed in old age.

¹ According to the widely accepted chronology of Sigurður Nordal, 'Formáli', in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), pp. v–cv (pp. lii–liii). This edition is hereafter referred to as *ES*. Compare also *ES*, p. 296.

The age and authenticity of many stanzas, ascribed to Egill by the saga, and the age of the saga itself is disputable.² The saga was written down before the second part of the thirteenth century and is often ascribed, together with *Snorra-Edda* and *Heimskringla*, to one of the best known Icelandic authors of the first part of the century, Snorri Sturluson.³ Subsequently, Snorri is often considered the author of a number (if not all) of the stanzas in *Egils saga*. This position is not adopted in this paper, which chiefly follows the saga's information as to the provenance of the stanzas—whatever poet(s) stood originally behind the name of Egill—and their approximate dating (the tenth century). However, I do not insist on the historical truth of the saga or of its main hero and take into consideration the possibility of both traditional and editorial changes.

The great majority of the stanzas considered here is among those most strongly suspected of being metrical exercises of later poet(s). These are the first two stanzas, ascribed by the saga to the three-year-old Egill, and almost all of his elderly stanzas. Therefore, yet another weak attempt can be undertaken to find out whether these stanzas are likely to belong to one poet, the same that Egill's mature stanzas are ascribed to. To this end, I will analyse the syntactic and semantic structure of each stanza, ascribed to Egill as a child or an old man, paying special attention to their imagery. A syntactic and semantic comparison should show, to which extent the youthful stanzas and the old-age stanzas, ascribed to Egill, are holistic and autonomous groups. It will as well emphasize common and different aspects in these two groups of Egill's stanzas, also in relation to the stanzas he is considered to have created as adult.

The main emphasis is on the image of the viking as a child and as an old man: the imagery that Egill uses in his stanzas to describe himself and 'the others' at these stages of his life, and the attitude of 'the others' towards a youthful viking poet and an elderly one, as displayed in that imagery. My hope is that the analysis of the imagery of Egill's stanzas, in comparison with some other old vikings' stanzas and together with the saga prose context, will give the reader a picture of

² Sigurður Nordal, 'Formáli', pp. v–xv, remains among the best discussions of the age of Egill's stanzas.

³ These three works were recently published as collected works of Snorri Sturluson: Snorri Sturluson, *Ríksafn*, ed. by Helgi Bernóusson, Jónas Kristjánsson and Örnólfur Thorsson, 3 vols (Reykjavík, 2002).

Egill as a child and as an old man both in the Viking Age and in the thirteenth century, when the saga was written down.

Stanzas Ascribed to Egill as a Child

This group consists of three stanzas which Egill composed, according to *Egils saga*, before he reached the age of twelve. Twelve years is the age when children become first considered adult by medieval Icelandic law,⁴ saga authors,⁵ and a number of contemporary psychologists and scholars of language acquisition.⁶

Childhood, in turn, has often been divided—by medieval and modern scholars—into three main stages:

1. from birth to about 3 years, when a child stops drinking mother's milk, can help itself and express itself; it starts independent daily life;
2. from 3 to 7 years: now the child has mainly adapted itself to a normal independent life, can express itself independently (without having to imitate the adults) and is ready to partake in working or learning; and
3. from 7 to 12 years the child is gradually becoming an adult.⁷

Two stanzas composed by the three-year-old Egill, and a stanza composed at six have been ascribed by the saga to Egill. A great majority of scholars consider the two stanzas of the first subgroup too complicated

⁴ Particularly boys, who become partly responsible for their deeds but also gain more social functions, compare *Grágás*. *Lagaþáfn íslenska hjóðveldisins*, ed. by Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson and Mörður Árnason (Reykjavík, 1997), pp. 226–27 and 235. For a detailed analysis of *Grágás* provisions on transition to adulthood, see Percivall, this volume.

⁵ See Anna Hansen, 'Representations of Children in the Icelandic Sagas', in *Sagas & Societies. International Conference at Borgarnes, Iceland, September 5.–9. 2002*, ed. by Stefanie Würth, Tönno Jonuks and Axel Kristinsson, <<http://w210.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/dbt/volltexte/2004/1057/>> [accessed 31 August 2006]. Compare Larrington (this volume) who also deals closely with Egill's transitional age.

⁶ See Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (Yale, 2001), pp. 6–10 and 317–22. On childhood in *Egils saga*, see Brynhildur Þórarinsdóttir, 'Hirðin og hallærisplanið: forgelgjur og unglingar í Eglu', in *Míðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík, 2005), pp. 113–36.

⁷ Orme, *Medieval Children*, pp. 6–10, 66 and 68. Different views on life stages, from medieval to modern times, are discussed in this volume, among others, by Larrington, Percivall, and Sánchez-Martí.

to be created by a child. Finnur Jónsson publishes them as ‘Anonyme vers’—‘Uægte vers i sagaer’ in his edition of skaldic poetry.⁸ However, the new edition of the skaldic corpus apparently plans to include these two stanzas into Egill’s authentic poetry.⁹ This chapter will hopefully show that the structure of the stanzas is not as difficult as it seems to be and that a precocious child like Egill could have composed them at a very young age.

The two stanzas were composed by the three-year-old hero at his grandfather’s feast. Egill was refused permission to go there, but went anyway, pursuing his family a long way through dangerous swamps on an unsaddled horse. He finally arrived at his grandfather Yngvarr’s farm and presented his first stanza in a drinking verse contest. The following morning he received his reward for the poetry (three shells and a duck’s egg) and responded with another stanza.

(1) Kominn emk enn til arna
 Yngvars, þess’s beð lyngva
 —hann vask fúss at finna—
 fráþvengjar gefr drengjum;
 mun eigi þú, þægir,
 þrévetran mér betra,
 ljósundinna landa
 linns, óðar smið finna.¹⁰

⁸ *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, A 1–2 (Tekst efter håndskrift-erne), B 1–2 (Rettet tekst) (Copenhagen, 1912–1915), A1, p. 603, and B1, pp. 602–03. Hereafter referred to, respectively, as *Skjaldedigtning*, A1 and *Skjaldedigtning*, B1.

⁹ Compare Egill Skallagrímsson, ‘Lausavísur’, ed. by Margaet Clunies Ross, in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* <<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au>> [accessed 31 August 2006].

¹⁰ *ES*, pp. 81–82, stanza 4. Finnur Jónsson (*Skjaldedigtning*, B1, 602–603, stanza 1) reads *ern* ‘vigorous’ for *enn*, which does not seem supported by the manuscript evidence (see *Skjaldedigtning*, A1, 603). In this paper, Egill’s stanzas are chiefly cited after *ES*. *Skjaldedigtning*, A1 and B1 is always consulted, but only mentioned in case of conceptual differences, as well as other chief editions of Egill’s stanzas. Punctuation is partly adopted to *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* <<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au>> (mentioned above). Thus, complete, independent intercalary clauses are separated by long dashes, while discontinuous ones, by parentheses; subordinate clauses or their intercalary parts, by commas. Prose word order is chiefly based on *ES*. Word-for-word translation with explanation of kennings is mine (*ISH*). Simple kennings are treated as in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*: referents are explained in capitals, enclosed in square brackets (here also in single quotation marks). For prolonged kennings (*tvíkennt* and *rekil*), I choose to explain kennings in simple words, having the referent, which also functions as the determinant for next kenning, in single quotation marks.

Kominn emk enn til arna Yngvars, þess's gefir drengjum lyngva fránpvengjar beð; vask fúss at finna hann; þú mun eigi, þægir ljósundinna linns landa, finna þrévetran óðar smið betra mér.

I have still come to [the] hearths of Yngvarr, who gives to men¹¹ bed of glittering thong of lings ['GOLD': thong of lings 'worm', bed of worm 'gold']; I was eager to find him; you will not, pusher of light-twisted lands of worm ['GENEROUS MAN': lands of worm 'gold', pusher of gold 'generous man'], find [a] three-winter-old smith of song ['POET'] better than me.

This first stanza produces an impression of extremely complicated *dróttkvætt*. However, neither its prose word order nor its imagery is as complicated as it looks. The first *helmingr* 'half-strophe' has only one intercalary independent clause: *hann vask fúss at finna* ('I was eager to find him', line 3). This clause is independent and takes a whole line. It stands separately, does not interfere with the other lines or take our (and the poet's) attention from them. Therefore, it does not complicate much composition or understanding of the stanza. In the rest of the *helmingr*, the word order is almost natural.

The second *helmingr* does not present a special problem, either. It consists of only one clause. Most of the words, which break up the clause to form a kenning for Yngvarr, stand together in the stanza (*þægir* [...] *ljósundinna linns landa*: 'pusher [...] of GOLD'); so do those words which describe Egill (*þrévetran* [...] *óðar smið*: 'three-winter-old [...] POET'). This facilitates to a great extent both composition and understanding of the stanza.

The imagery of the stanza contains two prolonged kennings, *lyngva fránpvengjar beð*[r] 'GOLD' and *þægir ljósundinna linns landa* 'GENEROUS MAN', and a simple kenning: *óðar smið*[r] 'POET'. The longer, complex kennings both describe gold and use the same model: 'land / bed of worm', which is one of the most common—and undoubtedly very familiar to a novice poet—kenning-models for gold in Old Norse poetry. In the second case, the kenning for gold is a part of the kenning for a generous man, which is made by simply adding the word *þægir* to the gold-kenning. Both kennings here have some extra embellishment: 'bed of glittering thong of lings', 'light-twisted lands of worm'; however, even this embellishment consists of homotypic parallel epithets. Technically this all seems to be quite within the capability of a child, especially of

¹¹ The word *drengr* means primarily 'young man' (as well as 'worthy, valiant man'), which can be important for the three-year-old poet.

a child who was brought up in the house of the poet Skalla-Grímr and had at least two skald-forefathers (Skalla-Grímr and Kveld-Úlfr).

As with many other *dróttkvætt* verses, this stanza has subtext, implied or conveyed by means of imagery rather than directly by the wording of the stanza. Remarkably, the subtext here has a trace of quite childish concern. Egill's message to Yngvarr is apparently: 'You are not going to send me home (with shame) now, because I am such a good poet!' (The words of the stanza only say: I have come here and I am the best poet among the three-year-olds.) The imagery, however, takes only indirect part in creating this subtext, underlining Yngvarr's generosity and good-heartedness by parallel gold-kennings.

The same devices in syntax and imagery organization can be traced in Egill's second stanza, which is undoubtedly more complicated than the first one: namely, the words arrangement in the stanza and building up the imagery around parallel, common, and relatively easy kenning-models.

(2) Síþogla gaf sǫglum
sárgagls þría Agli
herðimeidr við hróðri
hagr brimrótar gagra,
ok bekkþiðurs blakka
borðvallar gaf fjorða
kennimeidr (sás kunni)
kørbeð (Egil gleðja).¹²

Hagr herðimeidr sárgagls gaf sǫglum Agli þría síþogla brimrótar gagra við hróðri; ok borðvallar blakka kennimeidr; sás kunni gleðja Egil, gaf fjorða, bekkþiðurs kørbeð.

Skilful hardening pole of gosling of wounds ['WARRIOR': gosling of wounds 'raven' / '(shooting) weapon', hardening pole of weapon 'warrior'] gave to eloquent Egill three ever-silent hounds of furious surf¹³ ['SHELLS'] for praise, and trying pole of horses of field of ship ['SAILOR': field of ship 'sea', horses of sea 'ships', trying pole of ships 'sailor'], he who knew [how] to please Egill, gave fourth, favourite bed of partridge of brook ['DUCK'S EGG': partridge of brook 'duck', favourite bed of duck 'duck's egg'].

The word order of stanza (2) seems astonishingly heavy. However, the words belonging to the same kenning either occur together (*brimrótar gagra*[r] 'SHELLS'), as in Egill's first stanza, or are placed right under

¹² *ES*, p. 82.

¹³ *Brimrót* can also mean 'sea-bottom'.

each other: *sárgagls...hirðimeidr* 'WARRIOR', *blakka borðvallar...kennimeidr* 'SAILOR', *bekkþiðurs...korbeð[r]* 'DUCK'S EGG'. Other words in the stanza also stick together, both horizontally and vertically, to form easier understandable clauses, compare *gaf soglum [...]* *Agli[...]* *við hróðri* ('gave to eloquent Egill [...] for praise'), or the intercalary clause *sás kunni [...]* *Egil gleðja* ('he who knew [how] [...] to please Egill'). Even though Egill composed the stanza in his mind, without pen and vellum, and could not, therefore, *see* the verticality of this stanza, as modern readers do, he could certainly *hear* this regular positioning of the words.

The imagery, again, seems to be appallingly complex: the four kennings, two for Yngvarr and two for his gifts, are all prolonged. However, both kennings for Yngvarr share the same type of base-word (*hirðimeidr* 'hardening pole' and *kennimeidr* 'trying pole') and belong to a very common—and one of the easiest—of kennings for man, which has tree as the base-word. The second kenning for Yngvarr and the kenning for shells share another very common kenning-model with the sea as the determinant: *brimrótar gagra[r]* ('sea hounds'), *borðvallar blakka[r]* ('sea horses').

The tendency to build imagery of a strophe around similar, well-known kenning-models clearly marks the first two stanzas by Egill. This building requires knowledge of a good number of *heiti* for varying kennings. Indeed, Egill demonstrates amazing skills in using *heiti*, some of them only occasional in *dróttkvætt* poetry. However, this organization of imagery facilitates considerably both comprehension and composition of the stanzas.

To be sure, two kennings in this second stanza are not quite traditional: *brimrótar gagra[r]* 'SHELLS' and *bekkþiðurs korbeð[r]* 'DUCK'S EGG'. Such referents as shells and duck's eggs are infrequent in skaldic poetry (since kennings usually depict weapons, ships, gold and other requisites of adult life), and indicate presumably the young age of the poet. Besides, traditional kenning-models look considerably changed in these kennings. When the common model 'an overland object (the base-word) + the sea (the determinant)' (compare 'sea horse' for ship) is applied on the base-word 'hounds' to produce a kenning for shells, the connection of the base-word and referent appears arbitrary compared to usual skaldic practice.¹⁴ The real frame of this kenning consists of

¹⁴ This compelled Sigurður Nordal (*ES*, p. 82) to explain the kenning by the similarity of the hounds, raising their necks as they growl, and shells, raising their narrow ends

associations of the young poet rather than traditional kenning-models. The same is true for depiction of a duck's egg through the traditional model 'worm's bed' (for gold). Here Egill's skaldic lexicon is not usual and, likely, not even acceptable in traditional *dróttkvætt*, giving editors much trouble.

This transformation of the kenning-models can be the result of two different processes. The kenning-models could be transformed consciously. Innovative skalds used to play with kenning-models, searching for new images and ways of their expression. The adult Egill was *primus inter pares* in this art; playing with words, images and kenning-models is his distinctive style feature.¹⁵ On the other hand, these kennings can be the result of childish exercises in *ars poetica*; a product of uncompleted learning to handle kenning-models and *heiti*. But where could a three-year-old child have learnt *ars poetica*?

Firstly, Egill belongs to a family of skalds. He could have received his drink of the mead of poetry with the breast-milk, literally or metaphorically. Independently of whether poetic genius is inherited or not, *dróttkvætt* canon could be a direct or indirect part of the child's education.

Secondly, the saga describes Egill as a child prodigy. *En þá er hann var þrjúvettr, þá var hann mikill ok sterk, svá sem þeir sveinar aðrir, er váru sex vetra eða sjau; hann var brátt málugr ok orðvís* ('When he was three years old, he was as big and strong as a boy of six or seven. He became talkative at an early age and had a gift for words').¹⁶ The saga accentuates both Egill's physical and poetical abilities, transferring Egill from the first stage of childhood and language-learning (up to the age of about 3 years) directly to the second stage (up to the age of about 7 years). Modern scholars eagerly recognize Egill's physical achievements, but are reluctant to recognize his mental deeds, even though a number of other child prodigies show their recognized art talents at very similar age. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart started playing music at the age of three or four years,

from the surf. This argument does not seem perfectly convincing and even leaves the impression that too much has been read into this kenning.

¹⁵ Compare Egill's famous stanzas about Ásgerðr (*ES*, pp. 148–49).

¹⁶ *ES*, p. 80; *Egil's Saga*, trans. by Bernard Scudder, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols (Reykjavík, 1997), I, p. 68. On Egill's precocity, see Anna Hansen, 'The Precocious Child: A Difficult Thirteenth-Century Icelandic Saga Ideal', in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of The 12th International Saga Conference Bonn/Germany, 28th July–2nd August 2003*, ed. by Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer (Bonn, 2003), pp. 220–28.

at five he was composing and performing at court. The chess-master Anatoly Karpov played chess at the age of four. Provided a favourable environment, and recognizing Egill's unusual physical potential, we should not deny him comparable mental development.

To be sure, someone could have helped Egill with his first poetry. This can be neither asserted nor denied due to the lack of saga information. In the same way, it is rather useless to challenge the age of the young skald, for absence of positive information contrary to that of the saga. As many other skalds in similar situation, Egill should be allowed the benefit of the doubt.

Thirdly, a number of elements of the adult Egill's style can be traced in these stanzas. The adult Egill was an expert in unusual and experimental kennings. He also played games with skaldic metres, for example, putting an extra *aðalhending* 'full rhyme' in a stanza to underline its meaning or image-play (compare *síþogla* 'ever-silent': *soglum* 'eloquent' in stanza (2)).¹⁷ He was very conscious about the nature of the poetry and his own status as a skald.¹⁸ Finally, he was an expert in subtexts and hints, in concealing his objective (e.g., gold or Ásgerðr) in his single stanzas.

The problem of recognizing the first two stanzas as composed by Egill at the age of three lies not only in these two stanzas as such but also in Egill's third youthful stanza, which he composed as a six-year-old, after killing his first enemy. This stanza is very different from the first two. Its metre, word order and imagery are very simple; it has no kennings, only two *heiti* for ship. Therefore, it looks much more like a first poetic experience of a child than the first two stanzas.

(3) Þat mælti mín móðir,
at mér skyldi kaupa

¹⁷ Guðrún Nordal traces some metrical features in the poetry of the young and adult Egill in: 'Ars metrica and the composition of *Egils saga*', in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of The 12th International Saga Conference Bonn/Germany, 28th July-2nd August 2003*, ed. by Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer (Bonn, 2003), pp. 179-86 (p. 182).

¹⁸ This topic is much discussed, as well as this particular episode at Yngvarr's farm as an *exemplum* of Egill's future poetic and social activity. See Guðrún Nordal, 'Ars metrica', p. 182; Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Art of Poetry and the Figure of the Poet in *Egils saga*', in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. by John Tucker (New York, 1989), pp. 126-49 (pp. 138-39); Laurence de Looze, 'Poet, Poem and Poetic Process in *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 104 (1989), 123-42 (pp. 126-29); William Sayers, 'Poetry and Social Agency in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*', *Scripta Islandica*, 46 (1995), 29-62 (pp. 34-35).

fley ok fagrar árar,
fara á brott með víkingum,
standa upp í stafni,
stýra dýrum knerri,
halda svá til hafnar,
hoggva mann ok annan.¹⁹

My mother said, that I should be bought [a] ship and beautiful oars, go away with vikings, stand up in [the] stem, steer [a] precious ship, go then to [a] harbour, strike [a] man and another.

A very simple stanza among other, more complicated, ones can be found in many sagas. However, in this particular case it only strengthens the disbelief in that stanzas (1)–(2) are genuine. Nonetheless, the appearance of this simple stanza exactly at this time in the saga, when Egill is coming to the end of the second stage of childhood and language acquisition, is quite logical. At the age of three, on the border of the first and second stage of language acquisition, a child still has to imitate the speech of adults, repeating and adapting their speech to what it wants to say. Therefore, Egill's first two stanzas are built very much like mature poetry, and it is difficult to believe that a child composed them. At the age of six, by the end of the second stage, a child does not need to imitate adults any longer but can express itself independently. Thus, Egill's third, simpler stanza is likely to be not his first poetic experience, but his first stanza (or one of his first stanzas) that he created totally on his own, without imitating an existing poetic style. In this stanza, we hear Egill's own poetic voice; his own, strong feelings of gladness and anticipation. It is not unlikely that the rebel Egill opposes at this point—perhaps unconsciously—the simplicity of this stanza to the complex *dróttkvætt* of the adults, which he had imitated before.

The newly-gained independence shows itself also in that Egill progresses in elaborating his own style. The imagery of this stanza describes Egill as a sea-warrior (*vikingr*, as opposed to *kotungar* 'farmers'), which will be a strong feature of his mature stanzas. He already sees in his mind a viking ship (first just a swift ship, *fley*, then a bigger *knorr*), and also battles. Egill is literally composing himself into the viking community, as he was composing himself into the status of a court skald in his first two stanzas. From the age of three Egill shows himself as a viking from the old heathen times: unusually strong, bold, thirsty for

¹⁹ *ES*, pp. 100–01.

gold and blood, killing whoever is in his way (later in the saga he will show his inherited *berserkr*-nature); but also skilful in poetry and, as the saga shows later, in *rúnir* and related knowledge. In this sense, Egill's poetry is in accordance with his image in the saga prose.

However, Egill is not deprived of feelings towards his family and friends; especially when the viking is getting old and his powers, both physical and social, leave him.

Stanzas Ascribed to Egill as an Old Man

Egill returned to Iceland for good at around fifty years of age and became an old man there. The first years after his return prove fruitful for him as a farmer, chieftain and poet. He lives an active life, multiplies his wealth and marries off his children and relatives, goes to the Alþingi and has poetical disputes with the skald Einarr Helgason *skálaglammi*. He creates two of his masterpieces: *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða*, apart from a *drápa* about the shield given by Einarr. Egill seems still healthy and strong for a good part of his last period in Iceland. But eventually the saga reports: *Egill tók þá at eldask mjök* ('By this time, Egill was growing very old').²⁰

Demarcated by this remark, five stanzas belong to Egill's old age, which has two stages:

1. Advanced age: Egill is less active, but seems to remain relatively healthy and powerful. He eventually transfers his farm to his son Þorsteinn and moves to his step-daughter Þórdís, but still has will and power to settle down a land conflict between Þorsteinn and Steinarr. Two stanzas out of five belong to this period, together with *Berudrápa*.
2. Decay: Egill becomes very weak and powerless. He creates nothing but three occasional single stanzas.

During his advanced age, Egill spends more time at home. His son Þorsteinn goes to the Alþingi in his place. Once he borrows Egill's silk

²⁰ *ES*, p. 274; *Egill's Saga*, trans. by Bernard Scudder, p. 164. Different criteria of old age, such as ability to work and participation in social activity along with chronological and physiological factors, are discussed by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Lewis-Simpson, Ármann Jakobsson, this volume.

scarves to wear at the Alþingi—without Egill’s knowledge—and draggles them. Egill discovers this later and feels betrayed:

(4) Áttkak erfínytja
arfa mér til þarfan;
mik hefr sonr of svíkvinn
—svík telk í því—kvikvan;
vel mátti þess vatna
víggríðandi bíða,
es hafskíða hlœði
hljótendr of mik grjóti.²¹

Áttkak erfínytja arfa mér til þarfan; sonr hefr of svíkvinn mik kvikvan;
telk svík í því; vatna víggríðandi mátti vel bíða þess, es hafskíða hljótendr
hlœði grjóti of mik.

I did not have [a] useful heirdom-using heir; [the] son has betrayed me
[while I am still] living; I consider this treachery; rider of horse of waters
[‘SAILOR’: horse of waters ‘ship’, rider of ship ‘sailor’] could well wait
untill receivers of ocean ski [‘SAILORS’: ocean ski ‘ship’, receivers of ship
‘sailor’] would pile stones over me.

Stanza (4) is the only one among those five ascribed by the saga to the old Egill that scholars usually recognize as his. At the same time, this stanza strongly resembles Egill’s *youthful* stanzas, seldom recognized as his creation. It has a relatively straightforward word order; the words forming the two kennings (*vatna víggríðandi* ‘SAILOR’ and *hafskíða hljótendr* ‘SAILORS’) are either placed together or one under the other. The two kennings draw on similar ideas and models. This makes the stanza much simpler than many others that Egill created as adult, and prompts that Egill is in his second childhood.

However, this stanza differs considerably from Egill’s youthful stanzas in the way the imagery functions. Contrary to stanzas (1)–(3), the imagery takes an active part in forming the subtext of stanza (4). Egill elaborated his distinctive style and imagery throughout his life, and now he uses all its power as his physical power is leaving him, often deliberately contrasting his present imagery to the imagery of his earlier stanzas.

The contrast of the sea and the land has always been strong in Egill’s imagery. From six years of age onwards, Egill often describes him-

²¹ *ES*, p. 274. On *erfínytja* and *arfa*, see Ernst A. Kock, *Notationes norrøne: anteckningar till Edda och Skaldediktning*, 4 vols (27 parts), Lund Universitets årsskrift. N.F. Avd., 1 (Lund, 1923–1944), II (part 7), 39–40, § 1050.

self—positively—as a sea-warrior, viking, as opposed to a ‘shore loafer’, farmer.²² However, now the kennings *vatna viggriðandi* and *hafskíða hljótenr* describe not Egill, but the young generation, prompting that Egill is no longer a viking who travels overseas and partakes in brilliant battles. Now he himself is an old ‘shore loafer’ and has to pass the viking role over to next generation, and his imagery stresses this turn.

This young generation is, however, not only hostile but also deeply alien to Egill. His only living son Þorsteinn is a farmer. He will not become a viking hero after Egill, even though he is brave and strong and inherits in due time not only the silk scarves, but also weapons and ships; ships that he will use for trade, not for battles. Again, the imagery of the stanza underlines this by these two sea-orientated, but not bellicose kennings, describing Þorsteinn and his milieu through ships.

In this way, the sea imagery loses its brilliant, positive connotations. However, the land imagery remains negative. What awaits Egill is prosaic, non-heroic death ashore. The new and different lords of life and sea, *hafskíða hljótenr*, will soon put land-stones (*grjótt*) over dead Egill.

This imagery, so different from Egill’s previous stanzas, tells much more than the words of the stanza. It deepens and highlights the old Egill’s anxiety for the future which he is deprived of. Egill’s irate exclamation *Svik telk í því* (‘I consider this treachery’) can as well be addressed not only to his non-viking son, but to the life and fortune, which took his viking-like son Þoðvarr, leaving Egill alone in the rapidly changing world with its new, different heroes.

The next stanza is related to Egill’s another favourite occupation—gaining estates—and develops the topics of loss and of betrayal on the part of the young generation, the protégé of Egill and his future heirs:

(5) Spanðak jorð með orðum
endr Steinari ór hendi;
ek þóttumk þá orka
arfa Geirs til þarfar;

²² Compare stanza (33) (*ES*, p. 180), which Egill declaimed as he came, after his shipwreck in England, to the king Eiríkr *blóðox*. In the first *helmingr*, Egill opposes himself, travelling long and difficult *öldu veg* ‘way of wave’ [‘SEA’] by *Íva jó[r]* ‘horse of [sea-king] Ívi’ [‘SHIP’], to his enemy Eiríkr, who is just described as sitting (governing) in England: *atsitjanda enskrar foldar* ‘sitting on English land’. While praising the king superficially, the stanza also mocks him. Egill’s description of himself is topped by the bellicose kenning *siskelfir undar blíks* ‘ever-making-shake flame of wound’ [‘WARRIOR’], which is full of motion and directly contrasted to Eiríkr’s passive land-sitting.

mér brásk minnar systur
 mögr; hétumk þá fögru;
 máttit þols of bindask
 Blundr; ek slíkt of undrumk.²³

Spanðak endr jörð með orðum ór hendi Steinari; ek þóttumk þá orka
 til þarfar arfa Geirs; mögr minnar systur brásk mér; hétumk þá fögru;
 Blundr máttit of bindask þols; ek of undrumk slíkt.

Formerly I allured land from Steinarr's hand by words; I thought then
 [that I was] work[ing] for [the] benefit of [the] son of Geirr; he gave
 me beautiful promises; my sister's son failed me; Blundr could not refrain
 from misfortune; I am astonished at such [thing].

The mood of this stanza is, however, very different from that of stanza (4). In spite of the loss of land—something that had given the younger Egill the power of a berserk—and the betrayal, this stanza does not contain threat or reproach; only surprise and regret. Either the old age has brought Egill peace, or he just cannot do much about things any longer. Not only does his physical power leave him, but even the power of words does not bring a desired result any longer, and this disappointment can account for the simplicity of the stanza, its almost natural word order (simple clauses are numeral, but not intercalary) and simple imagery, resembling the stanza composed by Egill at the age of six. However, instead of gladness and anticipation in the beginning of Egill's life, this stanza shows disappointment and sadness towards its end.

The three stanzas from Egill's decay, his last stanzas, belong to the episodes which seem more loosely connected to the saga than those already discussed. Each consists almost exclusively of a stanza and its necessary context, often actually provided by the stanza itself. These episodes are often considered as anecdotes about powerless and useless old men mocked by women, which were attached to *Egils saga*, and thus the stanzas are not necessarily by Egill. On the other hand, these stanzas can as well be the only material that the tradition preserved about the old Egill, who was then no longer remarkable by being involved in quarrels and battles. The question is, then, whether the stanzas bear features, characteristic of Egill's poetry, and can be therefore considered as belonging to Egill.

Egill is depicted as half-deaf, almost or totally blind and hardly able to stand on his feet. He mainly sits at his step-daughter's home with

²³ *ES*, p. 293.

women and tries to get warm by the fire.²⁴ He is no longer among real men but among women; even worse, he is a stranger to their territory and has less power than they do.²⁵ His position is worse than a child's: he does not have any future, he is of no use, he only takes shelter and food; but the only thing he can do about it is to compose bitter verses. They are three, as with his youthful stanzas.

(6) Vals hefk vófur helsis;
váfallr em ek skalla;
blautr erum bergis fótar
borr; en hlust es þorrin.²⁶

Hefk vófur helsis vals; ek em váfallr skalla; bergis fótar þorr²⁷ erum blautr; en hlust es þorrin.

I have waggles of horse of necklace ['NECK'],²⁸ I am tottering dangerously for my bold head, I have wet / soft borer of tasting-foot ['TONGUE' or 'PENIS'],²⁹ and my ear is dried-up.

(7) Hvarfak blindr of branda
—biðk eirar Syn geira—
—þann berk harm á hvarma
hnitvøllum mér—sitja;
es jarðgöfugr orðum,
orð mín, konungr forðum,
hafði gramr at gamni,
Geirhamðis mik framði.³⁰

²⁴ *ES*, p. 294; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (this volume) quotes the saga description of old Egill and discusses Egill's ageing.

²⁵ The topic of territory and power division between genders is developed in Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Konur og vígamenn: staða kynjanna á Íslandi á 12. og 13. öld*, Sagnfræðirannsóknir / Studia historica, 12 (Reykjavík, 1995), pp. 174–82.

²⁶ *ES*, p. 294; *hlust* is *lust* in *Möðruvallabók* (*Skjaldedigtning*, A1, 59) and can be interpreted, in connection with line 3, as kindred to *losti* 'desire' (Snorri Sturluson, *Ritsafn*, I, 479).

²⁷ Alternatively, *bergis þorr fótar* 'tasting-borer of foot'. Usually printed as *bergifótar*, which comes from *Möðruvallabók* (cf. *Skjaldedigtning*, A1, 59, B1, 52) and is easier to handle.

²⁸ That is, 'I waggle my neck'; *helsir* means also 'ox', and *helsis val[r]* is also interpreted as 'old horse, old bull' (*Skjaldedigtning*, B1, 52; Snorri Sturluson, *Ritsafn*, I, 479).

²⁹ These two interpretations belong, respectively, to Finnur Jónsson (*Skjaldedigtning*, B1, 52) and Sigurður Nordal (*ES*, p. 294).

³⁰ *ES*, p. 295. Finnur Jónsson (*Skjaldedigtning*, B1, 52) and Ernst A. Kock (*Notationes norræne*, I (part 2), 28–31, § 246) give two different, emended versions of the stanza; however, not only the general meaning of the stanza is the same, but also the meaning of individual kennings, even though the kennings sometimes consist of different words in these readings. The prose word order in the second *helmingr* is mine.

Hvarfak blindr sitja of branda; biðk geira Syn eirar; berk þann harm á hvarma hnitvøllum mér; es jarðgöfugr konungr framði mik orðum Geirhamðis forðum, gramr hafði orð mín at gamni.

I wander to sit over [the] fire; I beg Syn of gore / spears³¹ ['WOMAN'; Syn is an *ásynja*] for peace; I bear that grief on clash-fields of eyelids ['EYES']; when land-noble king distinguished me by words of Geirhamðir ['GOLD': Geirhamðir is apparently a giant-name, words of giant 'gold'] formerly, [the] king had my words for amusement.

Egill is consistent in being deeply concerned with his poetry and his status of skald, interlacing this topic with the opposition of the past and the present, characteristic of the majority of verses about old age and explicitly present in stanzas (4)–(5). This concern is evident from the images of the poet's difficult present—his too dry poetic ear and too soft poetic tongue, both of no use any longer—in stanza (6), as well as from the explicit opposition in stanza (7): *harm[r]* 'grief' in the present (first *helmingr*) against *gam[an]* 'amusement, joy' in the past (second *helmingr*). The joy of the past is—very characteristically for Egill—particularly connected with the poetry and reward for it; the poetry—or Egill's present problems with it—is, in turn, associated with masculinity—or its present shortage—and the social status of the *old* skald. The ambiguous kenning *bergis fótur borr* 'TONGUE / PENIS' in stanza (6) is strengthened with the adjective *blautr* 'wet, soft', which has strong connotations against masculinity, mirroring Egill's decreasing respect among women. The kenning *helsis val[r]* 'NECK' (same stanza) presents an ironical contrast to the vigorous, bellicose imagery of the adult Egill, who used to describe his head through weapons rather than women's jewellery.³² The ambiguous and experimental kenning for woman in stanza (7), interpreted as 'Syn of spears', denotes a bellicose woman and supports the weakly-masculine poet's plea for peace. This turn in poetical descriptions is comparable to changing functions of the land and sea imagery in the old Egill's verses.

Syntactic and metrical organization of these stanzas also resembles the stanzas by Egill considered before, as well as his mature stanzas. Stanza (6) has a fairly natural word order without intercalary clauses, while those of stanza (7) are rather well marked (words that belong together semantically also stick together vertically and/or horizontally

³¹ *Geira*: gen. sing. of *geiri* 'gore', gen. plur. of *geirr* 'spear'.

³² Compare *hjalma klett[r]* 'helmet's rock' (*ES*, p. 193).

in the stanza). Stanza (7) shows Egill's usual playing with the rhyme, compare the extra *aðalhending* in line 3 (odd line, where a *skothending* should be enough) and powerful *dunhent* in lines 5–6.³³ All this additional rhyme accentuates the message of the stanza: the suffering of blind Egill (*harm* 'grief': *hvarma* 'of eye-lids') and his concern for the poetic word (*orð* : *orðum*). Stanza (4) draws on the same features, compare *dunhent* in lines 1–4 combined with *aðalhending* in line 3, underlining the theme of the heirs' treachery.³⁴ Stanza (5) demonstrates another feature of Egill's metrics, lack of *skothendingar* in their prescribed places (lines 3 and 7).

Stanzas (6)–(7) clearly demonstrate a number of features characteristic of Egill's poetry, in terms of topics (concentrating on poetry and gold), imagery (experimental kennings and imaginative play, continuing the line of the adult Egill), syntax and metrics. All this put together prompts that the verses should be genuine for Egill, although it does not quite exclude the opposite.

The last stanza ascribed to Egill is composed, quite unexpectedly, in *fornyrðislag*: alliterative, but non-rhymed metre of many eddic lays, which is much simpler than *dróttkvætt* and thus less popular among court skalds, and seldom used by Egill:

(8) Langt þykki mér;
 ligg einn saman
 karl afgamall
 án konungs vörnum;
 eigum ekkjur
 allkaldar tvær,
 en þær konur
 þurfa blossa.³⁵

I find it long; [I] lie alone, very old karl, without king's defence; I have
 two very cold heel / widows, and these women need flame.

³³ *Aðalhending*, so called 'full rhyme', is internal rhyme with identical consonants and preceding vowels, which is prescribed in even lines of *dróttkvætt*; its counterpart is *skothending* 'half rhyme', internal rhyme with identical consonants but different preceding vowels, prescribed in odd lines of *dróttkvætt*. *Dunhent* is a variant of *dróttkvætt* couplet (*vísufjórðungur*) with extra-rich rhyme: the latter *skothending* in the odd line is repeated in the *aðalhendingar* of the even line, in this case *jarð* : *orðum* / *orð* : *forðum*.

³⁴ Compare Guðrún Nordal, 'Ars metrica', p. 185.

³⁵ *ES*, p. 296. In line 4, *án* 'without' is problematic; Finnur Jónsson (*Skjaldedigting*, B1, 52–53) reconstructs *firr* 'far away', while Ernst A. Kock (*Notationes norræne*, III (part 14), 25, § 1924) has *af* in the same meaning.

Even though *fornyrðislag* occurs in skaldic poetry, it is more characteristic of the tradition of elegies and women's weeping, particularly in eddic lays, compare *Guðrúnargrátr*, *Oddrúnargrátr* and other lays of the same cycle. A number of elegies in *fornyrðislag*, belonging to male heroes and cognate to eddic laments, are found in *fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*, e.g. Hjálmar's lament in *Hervarar saga* and *Heiðreks* and Hildibrandr's lament in *Ásmundar saga kappabana*. Laments and weeping are, however, not characteristic of the heroes of Icelandic family sagas. Yet some of Egill's poetry stands quite close to elegy; apart from *Sonatorrek*, one can mention Egill's stanzas on the death of his brother Þórólfr. Besides, in his later years Egill moves into the world of women, which could have influenced his poetry. Whatever the reason for *fornyrðislag*, this metre makes the last stanza by Egill very simplistic, which brings us back to his first stanza that everyone agrees about: *Þat mælti mín móðir* 'My mother said'. However, the old Egill is true to himself: he plays with words and images also in his last stanza and composes *offjóst*, drawing on the homonymous words *ekkja* 'widow' and *ekkja* 'heel'.

Egill is not the only hero of Icelandic family sagas, who has an old-age stanza in *fornyrðislag*. The famous viking Hólmǫngu-Bersi, one of the heroes of *Kormáks saga*, addresses this philosophical stanza, contrasting a child and an old man, to his young foster-son Halldórr

(9) Liggjum báðir
í bekk saman
Halldórr ok ek,
hvergi færir;
veldr æska þér,
en elli mér;
þess batnar þér,
en þeygi mér.³⁶

We lie both together on a bench, Halldórr and I, capable of nothing; youth causes [this to] you, but old age [causes this to] me; you will recover from this, but I will not.

The image of the old Bersi is remarkably like the old Egill's one. A viking and dueller (hence his agnomen), he also becomes a farmer in his old age and composes a number of stanzas, describing difficulties

³⁶ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), p. 261, stanza (48). This stanza is also in *Laxdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 5 (Reykjavík, 1934), p. 76, stanza (1), where the stanza itself and its context is slightly different. However, both versions show well different aspects of senility.

of an old man's life: he has to eat soft porridge instead of harder and better cheese; his feet do not bear him any longer; and his offenders inside his own family can kill him. Like Egill, Bersi is concerned with conflicts around his estate, which are amazingly similar to Þorsteinn's and Egill's conflicts with Steinarr and Blundr; Bersi also composes a stanza on this topic.³⁷ On the other hand, Bersi cares much more for his combats than for his poetry, which he never mentions in these stanzas, and his imagery is very different from what we find in the stanzas ascribed to the old Egill.

Conclusions

Neither the youthful nor the old-age stanzas that the saga ascribes to Egill clearly form holistic groups. Thus, stanzas (3) and (8) stand apart, as if they closed, respectively, Egill's youthful and old-age creative periods. Other stanzas group into pairs, prompted by the saga context; (6)–(7) are, however, quite close to (4)–(5).

Nonetheless, all of the stanzas considered in this paper bear features characteristic of Egill's poetry, such as his concern for his poetry and for himself as a skald (including the poet's reward, gold, and estates, which fits well with the prose), as well as his innovative imagery, and his use of rhyming patterns. This prompts one to suggest that all these stanzas are genuine for one and the same skald, whom the saga names Egill Skalla-Grímsson. The evidence of *Mǫðruvallabók*, the manuscript containing the most celebrated text of *Egils saga*, where all the stanzas under consideration are written by the main hand (even though a number of other stanzas is written by another hand), supports this view.³⁸

Stanzas (1)–(2) are already clearly marked by Egill's individual style, together with some juvenile features; they are also within a child's capacity. To be sure, it is hardly possible to rule out the chance that Egill could have composed them in his old age, boasting about his youth.³⁹ Indeed, his youthful and old-age stanzas have a number of common features, such as relatively simple syntax. Moreover, the use of parallel

³⁷ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 260, 262, stanzas (47), (50); p. 261, stanza (49).

³⁸ Compare Bjarni Einarsson, 'Indledning', in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, Bind I, A-redaktionen*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, Editiones Arnarnagæðar, A 19 (Copenhagen, 2001), pp. xxv–lxv (pp. xxvii–xxix).

³⁹ Sigurður Nordal, 'Formáli', pp. xii–xiii.

kenning-models in one and the same stanza unites those stanzas which are ascribed to the young and old Egill.

However, the stanzas of the old Egill differ from his youthful stanzas not only in terms of the subtext created through the imagery but also thematically. Egill's old-age stanzas stress the difficulties of his age; his bright young days mainly constitute a contrasting background for his gloomy present. The young Egill requires appreciation from the audience; the old Egill pleads for mercy. Young Egill's stanzas are energetically oriented *towards* the sea, battles and poetry, while the old, powerless Egill says farewell both to the sea and the poetry; he has nothing to look forward to but grave-stones. Thus, it seems more likely that the stanzas ascribed to Egill as a child belong to a very young, precocious poet.

Egill's stanzas, considered here, and the prose of the saga complement each other to create his unique image, first as a precocious, poetical viking child, then as an old viking skald. Provided that the core of the stanzas is recognized as genuine, and that it matches freely the later prose, it should be suggested that there is a continuity in how young and old viking poets—and, to some extent, youth and old age in general—are regarded in the tenth and thirteenth centuries, at least in the sphere that we can judge of from *Egils saga*.

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